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The Sinful Messiah: Part Seven — Howell travels to Australia to reclaim scattered flock; a showdown with Marc Breault

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK © 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald Mar 1, 1993

Marc Breault didn't set out to lead anybody away from anything.

He went to Australia to forget.

It was far away from Vernon Howell and the Branch Davidians, a bizarre spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists based 10 miles east of Waco. Breault once had counted himself among Howell's most faithful followers.

Now he wanted to start anew with his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai, a native Australian and also a former cult member, and forget the last four years of his life, which he considered wasted.

Eventually, Breault, 29, started his own computer programming company.

But Breault couldn't forget that he had recruited many of Howell's followers. It ate at him. He felt guilty. But how to get anyone out of the cult was a quandary.

Cult members believed Howell was inspired.

Breault knew that if he went to the Australian cult members, most of whom lived near Melbourne, and said, "Hey guys, I've been studying my Bible and I can show you where Vernon is wrong," they would not listen. He was one of them.

But Breault did have a moment of inspiration.

The Australian Branch Davidians remembered Breault's dreams, his musings on whether he, too, might be anointed. Howell had tolerated his wonderings. So Breault told the Australians that he, too, was a prophet. And God had given him a revelation.

They agreed to hear Breault out.

Howell claimed to be the Lamb spoken of in the book of Revelation who would reveal the Seven Seals, the catastrophic events heralding the end of the world, didn't he- Only, didn't Howell also say he was Cyrus, the man who would destroy the Babylonians or unbelievers.

Well, Breault said, God had told him that the Lamb was really Jesus Christ. Not Cyrus. And not Vernon Howell.

It was easy to prove, Breault said. He read to them from the New Testament.

John 1:29: The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

Breault's plan worked. One by one, over about a year, many of the Australian followers concluded that Howell was a false prophet. Then Breault disclosed that he wasn't a prophet either.

The Branch Davidians were left with a void where their faith had been.

Howell tried to fill it. He fought back, issuing a revelation of his own. And it was breathtaking.

If the Bible said only the Christ could reveal the Seven Seals, that led to an inescapable conclusion, Howell argued. Had he not shown repeatedly that only he could unveil the baffling language guarding the Seven Seals.

What other explanation was there.

Dramatic difference

Vernon Howell was Jesus Christ, come again. But this time with a dramatic difference, according to Howell. He was the Sinful Messiah. The first Jesus was pure and sinless. How could he fairly judge anyone, Howell asked.

The Sinful Messiah explained much about Howell to his followers. This Jesus Christ cursed like a sailor and, by his own tongue, admitted lusting after women. And not from afar. The Branch Davidians knew he had taken the most desirable women in the group to bed.

It made a certain kind of sense.

Howell initially shied away from publicly acknowledging that he considered himself to be Christ.

"I'd be lying if I said yes," Howell said, in an interview with the Tribune-Herald. "I'd be lying if I said no."

But, in another interview, Howell confirmed making the astonishing claim.

"If the Bible is true, I'm Christ," he said. "But so what- What's so great about being Christ- A man nailed to the cross. A man acquainted with grief. You know, being Christ ain't nothing. Know what I mean- . . . If the Bible is true, I'm Christ. If the Bible is true. But all I want out of this is for people to be honest this time."

Breault, however, pointed out the flaw in Howell's claim to be a Christ prone to sin. It doesn't jibe with the Bible.

Hebrews 9:28 shows as much.

"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation."

The battle for the souls of the Australian cult members would climax in a showdown between Howell and Breault.

Howell traveled to Melbourne early in 1990, staying at the home of Bruce and Lisa Gent, who like the other Australians had wavered in the face of Howell's claim to be Christ.

Howell's attempt to revive his followers was grueling.

Bruce Gent, a builder, had a project going. At 7 a.m., he went to work. He came home at 6 p.m., showered, then went into Bible studies that lasted from 8 p.m. until long past midnight.

The Australians had heard rumors of the New Light, but Howell had denied it in an audiotape mailed to each of them. In the Gents' living room, where he could work on the cult members for hours, Howell confirmed that the married men had to find their perfect mates in heaven, Bruce Gent said. Their wives must cleave to Howell.

During the studies, Howell complained that some women who understood the truth of what he was preaching still dared to go to bed with their husbands.

He pointed to the bedroom of Bruce and Lisa Gent.

Not the Lamb

After several days of round-the-clock Bible studies, Lisa Gent checked into a motel. She studied her Bible and concluded that Howell was not the Lamb. He was not Christ. Gent called her husband, Bruce, and together they asked Howell to leave their home.

Howell moved in with James and Michelle Tom. Michelle Tom is the daughter of Lisa Gent.

Through his confidant, Steve Schneider, Howell called Marc Breault and challenged him to a showdown at the Toms' house for the souls of the Australian followers. Breault came, but asked his brother-in-law to call police if he and his wife, Elizabeth Baranyai, were not home by 10 p.m.

Breault tried to explain why he didn't believe Howell was inspired, but Howell hounded him on one point: who had taught him the Seven Seals- Didn't that prove Howell was the Lamb or Jesus Christ-

"Who taught you, Marc-" Howell asked repeatedly.

During the faceoff, Howell said he was the man on the white horse mentioned in Revelation, the lion of the tribe of Judah, because he was a Leo.

Breault made light of Howell's claim.

Since Howell also claimed to be the man on the black horse with a pair of scales in his hand, did that also mean he was a Libra, he asked.

Irate, Howell began talking as if he were Jesus, not the supposed Jesus of today, the Sinful Messiah, but the Jesus of the New Testament, remembering what it was like when Judas betrayed him. It was something Breault had never heard Howell do. He and Elizabeth left.

Shortly afterward, there was a knock at the door. It was past 10 p.m. A voice said the police were coming. Actually, it was only John Baranyai, worried about his sister and brother-in-law.

Howell, who had just claimed to be the incarnation of Christ, ran out the back door, grabbed a bicycle and pedaled away, leaving his followers on their own.

He left Australia empty-handed.

Breault pursued. He called some of the Branch Davidians living at Mount Carmel, but they refused to accept Breault's argument that Howell was a fraud. It was probably a waste of time to try to reach them, Breault decided. They were too close to Howell.

One he could rescue

In talking and corresponding with other former cult members, though, Breault came to believe there was one Branch Davidian he could rescue.

She was 10 years old. Her name was Kiri Jewell.

Her mother, Sherri Jewell, was a school teacher who spent much of her free time at the cult's house in La Verne, Calif. Breault had already failed to persuade her that Howell was not Jesus Christ, even though he and his wife had once been close to her. Sherri Jewell was maid of honor at their wedding.

But Kiri Jewell had a father who was not a Branch Davidian.

David Jewell was a disc jockey in South Bend, Ind. He and Sherri Jewell were divorced, but he had retained joint custody of his daughter.

In October 1991, Marc Breault called David Jewell. He asked Jewell if he knew whether his daughter ever wore a pendant. Yes, she wore a six-sided star — the Star of David, Jewell said.

Howell had targeted his daughter, Kiri, for the House of David, Breault told Jewell.

David Jewell sued for emergency custody of his daughter when she visited him in Niles, Mich., after Christmas.

The child custody hearing lasted from Feb. 25 to Feb. 28, 1992.

In the mellow tones of his profession, David Jewell told Judge Ronald Taylor in a St. Joseph, Mich., courtroom that he had a bad feeling about the Branch Davidians long before Breault testified.

"Sherri told me unless I cooperated with the move, I'd be forever damned to hell," Jewell said. "And if I did cooperate, I would be given more light. That kind of thinking set off alarm bells as to my daughter's well-being."

Breault, Elizabeth Baranyai and Jean Smith all paid their way over from Australia to testify on David Jewell's behalf.

Breault testified he had parted with Howell when he had to "face the reality of his taking young girls."

"Vernon would really emphasize to girls anywhere from 6, 7 on up, You should want to be with me,' " Breault said. " This is the ultimate thing. Your whole lives should be directed to this. You should know the Scriptures. You should know what I teach, so when you are ready, you can become one of the people in the House of David.' "

The attorney for Sherri Jewell asked Breault if he considered himself a prophet — referring to Howell's claim that Breault is a rival prophet.

Breault said that while in the cult he had visions and wondered what they meant.

"We lived, ate and breathed the Bible," Breault testified. "It was the whole center of our being. We would have these long studies. So for me to have dreams and visions about Vernonite theology wouldn't have been uncommon . . . Basically, I was just brainwashed. I was just out of it.

Jean Smith, 72, testified that she stayed at the La Verne house during a Passover. Men in the cult were not allowed there, except with Howell's permission, she said.

"The women in any of those rooms could be called by Vernon at that stage," Smith said.

Smith called Howell a "straight-out bully."

"I saw him harass Kiri one evening because she didn't know exactly what he thought she should know," Smith said.

Sherri Jewell never testified at the child custody hearing. On the third day, both sides announced to Judge Ronald Taylor that a shared custody agreement had been worked out. One of its conditions was that Kiri be kept away from Howell.

Judge Taylor told Sherri Jewell that it would be "a matter of grave concern" to him if the agreement were violated.

"I think it is very clear on this record that the best interests of Kiri are not at all served by her association with that organization or, most specifically, Mr. Howell or Koresh or whatever his appropriate name is," Judge Taylor said.

Having gotten one more cult member away from Howell, Breault returned home to Melbourne.

A programmer, he uses his computer at home to keep in touch with ex-cult members and the families of present cult members. They've fashioned an intelligence network of sorts that attempts to track the Branch Davidians' doings.

The rock crumbles

The former Australian cult members said they last heard as a group from Howell almost three years ago — after he lit out on a bicycle from the home of James and Michelle Tom.

An earthquake had struck Pomona, 30 miles outside Los Angeles, damaging the house where the men in the cult stayed.

Howell had picked out the house — which Don and Jeannine Bunds bought — because its rock facing reminded him of the Biblical parable about building your house on a rock.

The earthquake crumbled the rock, though, which fell to the ground.

Telephoning the Australians, Howell warned that the earthquake was a sign of God's anger at them for abandoning him.

It was too late for such blustering.

To the Australians, and Breault, if it signaled anything, the falling rock signaled the collapse of the Branch Davidians.

And, they hoped, Vernon Howell.

