

Warder Cresson: From Shaker to Quaker to Orthodox Jew

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **Quaker, Shaker, Rabbi: Warder Cresson, The Story of a Philadelphia Mystic**, by Frank Fox, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, April 1971, pages 146 -193.*

Introduction

Throughout history we find gentiles who decided that the only way for them to come close to HaShem was to convert to Judaism. Some of the more famous early converts include Yisro, Rus, the Navi Ovadia, Onkelos, Bulan, king of the Khazars, to name just a few. Converting to Judaism is not a step to be taken lightly, and may have many repercussions for the individual as well as his relatives. The conversion of Warder Cresson to Judaism most certainly had wide ranging implications for him and those associated with him.

Life as a Gentile

The second of eight children, Warder was born in Philadelphia on July 13, 1798 to John Elliot Cresson and Mary nee Warder. Apparently his family wanted to preserve his mother's maiden name, and therefore gave him the unusual first name of Warder. The Cressons were prominent Quakers and Warder was raised according to strict Quaker principles. At age 17 he was sent to work on the family farms in Darby and Chester. "He worked hard, saved his money and learned a great deal about agriculture. In 1819, when twenty-one, he rejoined his family, then residing in Byberry Township, north of Philadelphia. Two years later, he married Elizabeth Townsend of Bensalem." Within a few years he became the head of a very successful farming enterprise.

Warder was not content with limiting his interests to farming, and, by 1827, began to question some of the fundamental tenets of Quakerism. "In his first religious tract, entitled *An Humble and Affectionate Address to the Select Members of the Abington Quarterly Meeting*, he displayed a mind steeped in Scriptures as well as in the social issues of the day. He criticized religious leaders who based their teachings on an 'outward form, order or discipline,' attempting 'to make an inward man as they would lay out a barn.'"

Cresson eventually broke with the faith of his fathers. By the 1840s, he had become, in turn, a Shaker, a Mormon, a Seventh Day Adventist and a Campbellite. The latter two denominations believed that the Second Coming of Christ was close at hand. He also

became notorious in Philadelphia for religious “haranguing in the streets,” where he warned all within earshot of an approaching apocalypse.

In about 1840 Warder became acquainted with Reverend Isaac Leeser, the Hazan of Philadelphia’s Mikvah Israel Synagogue. In his *Discourses* published in 1836 Leeser wrote about the time of the messianic redemption “when the Israelites will be assembled from all the countries where they are now scattered.” Cresson was influenced by Leeser’s writings and also by those of Mordecai Manuel Noah. Noah espoused the belief that the Jews would soon return to Palestine to live in their former national homeland.

By 1844 Cresson became convinced that G-d was about to gather the Jewish people in Jerusalem as a prelude to the “end of days.” He wrote, “God must choose some medium to manifest and act through, in order to bring about his designs and promises in this visible world; ...This medium or recipient is the present poor, despised, outcast Jew ... G-d is about gathering them again [in Jerusalem].” He decided he had to move to Jerusalem to personally witness this great event.

In the spring of 1844 I left everything near and dear to me on earth. I left the wife of my youth and six lovely children, (dearer to me than my natural life), and an excellent farm, with everything comfortable around me. I left all these in the pursuit of truth, and for the sake of Truth *alone*. (Introduction to the Key of David, by W. Cresson, 1852. Available at <http://theoccident.org/Cresson/cresson01.html>)

American Consul to Jerusalem

Before leaving for Palestine Cresson went to Washington and applied for the position of the first American Consul to Jerusalem. In some way or other he was able to get Dr. I.A. Birkey and Congressman E. Joy Morris, later American minister to Turkey, two influential men from Philadelphia, to recommend him for the job. Morris had recently returned from a trip to the Near East and in a letter Secretary of State John C. Calhoun dated May 1, 1844 wrote that “Jerusalem is now much frequented by Americans.” Cresson volunteered to work without compensation and was officially notified of his appointment on May 17.

It turned out to be one of the shortest assignments on record. Barely a week after the commission was issued, Samule D. Ingham of New Hope Pennsylvania, who had served as President Jackson’s Secretary to the Treasury, wrote to Calhoun. “The papers have recently announced the appointment of Warder Cresson, Consul to Jerusalem. This man is the brother of Elliot Cresson, who is much distinguished for his activity in the cause of colonization, but the Consul has been laboring under an aberration of mind for many years; his mania is of the religious species. He was born a Quaker, wanted to be a preacher ... and has gone round the compass from one job to another, sometimes preaching about the church doors and in the streets; his passion is for religious controversy and no doubt he expects to convert Jews and Mohammedans in the East—

but, in truth, he is withal a very weak-minded man and his mind, what there is of it, quite out of order.... His appointment is made a theme of ridicule by all who know him....”

Therefore on June 22, 1844, Calhoun wrote Cresson: “I am instructed by the President to inform you, that, having reconsidered the proposal to establish a Consulate at Jerusalem, he is of the opinion it is not called for by public service, and therefore declines to establish it at present.”

However, by this time Cresson was on his way to Jerusalem carrying with him a dove and an American flag! He was therefore unaware that his commission had been revoked. Cresson in fact did act as the American Consul to Jerusalem for about half a year after his arrival.

A Momentous Step

During the next four years Warder found himself being increasing attracted to the Jews of Jerusalem and at the same time developing more and more doubts about his Christian beliefs. He noted many contradictions within the Gospels, and this led him to deny the divinity of Jesus. He was now prepared to take the most drastic step of his life, one that would have far reaching implications for him and his family back in America.

“I remained in Jerusalem in my former faith until the 28th day of March, 1848,” he wrote, “when I became fully satisfied that I could never obtain Strength and Rest, but by doing as Ruth did, and saying to her Mother-in-Law, or Naomi (The Jewish Church), ‘Entreat me not to leave thee ... for whither thou goest I will go’ In short, upon the 28th day of March, 1848, I was circumcised, entered the Holy Covenant and became a Jew....” Cresson was then forty-nine years old.

Returning Home

On May 7, 1848, Warder began his return trip to Philadelphia. He was most anxious to see his family whom he “loved most dearly above anything else on earth.” During his stay in Jerusalem he had written a number of letters to his family keeping them informed about his activities and his religious conversion. He was confident that he could convince them to adopt his newly-found faith. However, he was in for a rude surprise.

His wife Elizabeth has become a committed Episcopalian and wanted nothing to do with Judaism. In addition, Cresson, who now used the name Michael Boaz Israel, discovered that his wife, whom he had given power of attorney in his absence, had sold the family farm as well as most of his personal effects. In short, Cresson found himself essentially penniless.

Cresson tried to resolve his problems with his wife amicably, but she was not interested. She, together with some other family members, lodged a charge of lunacy against him! “It did not take long for a Sheriff’s jury of six men to issue a verdict of insanity.” (*Note: According to Black’s Law Dictionary, a sheriff’s jury is “a jury selected and summoned*

by a sheriff to hold inquests for various purposes, such as assessing damages in an action in which the defendant makes no defense or ascertaining the mental condition of an alleged lunatic.”)

Cresson, who never spent time in an asylum, appealed the verdict and a trial on the charge of lunacy began on May 13, 1851 in the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas. It became one of the most celebrated court trials of the 19th century.

At the heart of Cresson’s defense was his claim that in addition to his family’s desire to seize his financial resources was their opposition to his conversion to Judaism. They were sure that anyone who converted from Christianity to Judaism had to be insane. Thus, at the heart of this case was the question of whether a man was free to choose his religious affiliation.

More than 100 witnesses testified at the trial. Ultimately Cresson was vindicated of all charges. Newspapers throughout the country were almost unanimous in their praise for the verdict. Reporters focused on the fact that the issue at stake was one of religious freedom. They noted that Cresson was indeed “a strange bird,” with an unsteady disposition as evidenced by his previous religious affiliations. However, they pointed out that it was his conversion to Judaism that had triggered his family’s anger and led to the law suit. “If he had become a Roman Catholic they would probably have acquiesced.... They could permit him to become a Shaker, a Millerite, or a Mormon, but when he became a Jew, all confidence in his sanity was lost.”

Return to Jerusalem, Agricultural Plans

Cresson/Israel prayed at Congregation Mikveh Israel and lived according to halachah during the four years he spent in Philadelphia after his return from Jerusalem. Eventually he divorced his wife Elizabeth and, in 1852, returned to the Holy Land.

He became even more convinced that the Jews would soon return to the land of Israel. He felt that a necessary precursor to this was the development of agricultural endeavors by Jews. As a result, he proposed a sophisticated plan for the establishment of Jewish agricultural settlements. Indeed, his vision for agricultural development was far reaching, and it anticipated later Zionist efforts.

In 1855 he acquired a tract of land near Jaffa with the intention of putting his plans into practice. However, his planned model farm never developed due to insufficient financial support.

In the mid-1850s he married Rachel Moleano, and became an honored member of Jerusalem’s Sephardic community. They had two children, David Ben Zion and Abigail Ruth. Neither child lived to adulthood.

Warder died on October 27, 1860 and was buried on the Mount of Olives “with such honors as are paid only to a prominent rabbi.” His unusual life encompassed the almost

unheard of step of converting to Judaism, the issue of religious freedom, and the effect of national movements upon the Jews that eventually led to changes in their social and economic conditions.

Postscript – Meeting with Herman Melville

Herman Melville (1819 – 1891), the author of *Moby-Dick*, at one point in his life “looked to Palestine as the source of human experience and a possible hope for the future.” He went so far as to borrow money in order to go to Palestine, and in January, 1856 he and Cresson met. What Melville saw in Palestine shattered his illusions that it was the country of the future. He noted in his journal, “In the emptiness of the lifeless antiquity of Jerusalem, the migrant Jews are like flies that have taken up their abode in a skull.”

Melville also dismissed Warder’s theories on how the Jews could establish an agricultural economy in Palestine as completely unrealistic. “The idea of making farmers of the Jews is vain. In the first place, Judea is a desert, with few exceptions. In the second place, the Jews hate farming . . . and besides the number of Jews in Palestine is comparatively small. And how are the hosts of them scattered in other lands to be brought here? Only by a miracle.”

He did not have anything positive to say about Cresson either. “Warder Crisson [sic] of Philadelphia—an American turned Jew—divorced from (former) wife—married a Jewess, etc., Sad –”

Palestine and Cresson affected Herman Melville deeply. Indeed, he ended up writing a long, spiritual poem titled *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*. One of the main characters in this work is Nathan, a Christian turned Jew. It is not hard to see that Nathan is patterned after Cresson.

Melville could not believe that Jews would ever return to Eretz Yisroel and turn it into a country where agricultural endeavors thrived. Cresson was convinced that this would happen. History has shown who was correct.