



Figure 1:

Religion and Lunacy in Mid-19th Century America

The Man Who Would Be the First United States Consul to Jerusalem

By Jesse I. Spector and Donald Tocher

We have come into possession of an elegant, intensely mystical, religious stampless letter sent from Mount Zion, Jaffa, Palestine, by one Warder Cresson, to a friend, Ann Paschall Jackson, in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

The letter, postmarked, September 15, 1860, in Jaffa transited Alexandria, Egypt, on September 30, Lyon, France, on October 8, and Paris on October 9-10, before arriving in Boston, Massachusetts, on October 29 (Figures 1 and 2).

The cover and four-page letter (Figure 3) are a philatelic masterpiece. The content of the letter and the history behind the writer will prove to be an intriguing exploration of the 19th century religious fervor that swept the United States in the first half of the century.

For you see, the letter writer will claim to have been appointed American consul to Jerusalem—the first to hold this position. If true, his appointment would be indeed quite brief. If untrue, the title would be in his mind, rather than in reality.

And, in yet another light, our protagonist, Warder Cresson, would become the object of intense notoriety

throughout the United States when, in 1852, his family would lodge a charge of lunacy against him, resulting in a sheriff's jury rendering a verdict of insanity.

On what charge? That Warder Cresson, a Christian, had voluntarily converted to Judaism and been circumcised. For what other reason would a man undergo such a conversion if not insane?

Warder would appeal the decision, and, in the religious trial of the century, would contest the idea that determining one's religious preference was not a right of free choice in America. Join us as we raise the curtain on one of the most far-reaching inquiries into religious liberty adjudicated in the United States to the present time.

Let us begin with a commentary on this remarkable letter. As we will shortly get to know Warder Cresson, the missive speaks volumes about the man, his character, idiosyncrasies, remarkable theological resource, and...his mental status, particularly as it will apply to his subsequent trial.

The four-page letter is written to a friend with whom he has maintained a prior correspondence, as



Figure 2:

he replies to questions she has raised on a variety of mutually shared religious interests. The communication is written when Cresson was 63-years-old, as he mentions in describing health issues, particularly his rheumatism, and the physician’s recommendations for treatment thereof.

One becomes aware in his writing of a Quaker upbringing—having given up the faith but not the traditional address of others with “thou” and “thee.” Old habits, indeed.

Another characteristic of his writing is the physical perfection of his sentences, written as though a ruler were in his hand, lines perfectly straight, as he records his thoughts with a firm hand, devoid of the ostentatious calligraphic style of the age and with definitive underlining of words and phrases for emphasis.

This is by no means a rambling, madcap style, one that might be included in the evaluation of a patient by an alienist (psychiatrist) at the time.

What becomes evident, and has been frequently commented on by his biographers, is the rapid transition of his thoughts, from religious polemic to autobiographical detail and mundane social commentary.

Some ascribed this to scattered thinking; however, it seems much more in keeping with what is known about his incredible facile mind when it comes to theological discourse. He is a virtual encyclopedia of scripture, religious history of Christians, Jews and “Mohammedians.”

The contextual material in this letter consists of similar themes that had been his beliefs since his late twenties: redemption, internalization of religious thought, sympathy for the poor and downtrodden,

antipathy to the wealthy and ostentatious, a conviction of the rightness of Jewish theology, and, most pronounced, a conviction in the messianic Second Coming in the immediate future—one that he envisions without fear. All of these perceptions can be found within this one letter, and are embodied in his magnum opus, *The Key of David* published in 1852.¹

We conclude this inspection of Warder’s letter with but several additional observations. Warder responds to Ann Paschall’s questions regarding the Holly Land with an offhand, but indeed humorous, suggestion that there is so much to describe, best she simply obtain a copy of a travel book on “Memorable Places” published by Lane and Tippet in New York for the full story. So much for the travel log.

He does, however, give a marvelous physical description of the remains of Solomon’s Temple, describing the massiveness of the stone foundation down to meter detail. He describes the “poverty and suffering” in Jerusalem, a city then of 25-27,000, “including good Jews.”

He details his typical day, from his rising with the sun, performing ablutions, praying, his choice of garb, and shopping for food. Yes, there is more, but we conclude for now with a treat for the philatelist: Cresson informs Paschall that the postage for the letter is 45 cents, and he has taken the liberty of including a letter to his mother along with this missive to her. “The letters of mine, seem to go so very quick, that I will enclose my Mothers.”

Warder Cresson was born on July 13, 1798, in Philadelphia, the second of eight children of John Elliot Cresson and Mary Warder (from whom he would receive his given name).

Mount Zion 9th Moth 1860.
In answer to thine, of 7th Moth 1860.

My Dear Friend,
Ann Passah Jackson,

"And the Redeemed of the Lord, shall return, & come to Zion." Is. 35:10. - 10. & 31:11. I am, if thine one of the ransomed, or redeemed, God can bring, & will bring thee, to Zion, for mark the word shall come, is positive, absolute & certain, but then one must be first one of the "ransomed," or "redeemed," of the Lord; "Ruth" was one of the "redeemed of the Lord," whilst her Sister "Leah" proved that she was not, for she backslid, or went back, to her people, & unto her Gods" 1st Chapt. vers 15th. But her mother appears to have been a very wise & discrete woman, for she had heard how that the Lord had visited his people, in giving them "Bread," vers 6th, therefore she came to Bethlehem, which is liberally means, "the House of Bread." I perhaps she ascertained, as I have done, or did, before I came to Jerusalem, that the "Black Horses" (or one of the "4 spirits of Heaven,") or both the North country, have quell'd my spirit, in the North Country. See 2nd Chapt. vers 2, 5 & 8th. America, in the North Country, from Philadelphia, to St. Louis, the mother of Ishmael, & the present Slaves, was a very bad woman, & her son was very bad, & so, are very many of their descendants, therefore God said to Sarah, "Cast out the Bond woman, & her son; for the son of this Bond woman, shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. Gen^l 21:10. & why? Because, neither Hagar, nor Ishmael, was either of them, the "Redeemed of the Lord," but Hagar was an Egyptian, & a woman, of Great uncleanness, I would not submit herself to Sarah, her mistress; & Ishmael was a "Mocker" (see vers 9th of the 21st Chapt.) & tried to kill Isaac, several times, & his descendants, are to this day, only "Mockers" or mimics, of Isaac, or the True Israel of God, in their Religion, as their "Koran" fully testifies; & very soon, they will be cast-out, from this land, as the 5th Chapt. of Isaac declares, & not return, to Zion, with the "Redeemed of the Lord" with songs & unwearied joy, upon their heads, because, they are "Unclean" & Egyptians; but (Egypt) shall be called, the Basest, of all Kingdoms." Ezekel 29:16.

Thou asks me, to give thee "a description of the memorable place, I now inhabit; Well, it is truly a memorable place, but as the topography of it alone, would require very many letters, I will refer thee, to "Barclay's Walk, round Jerusalem," or "Ancient & Modern Jerusalem" Published by Lane & Tappin, No. 30. for the Sunday School Union 200th Newbury St. I give thee instead, I remind thee, of Korah, who, nor obey, the Angel of the Lord, but went away into the Midianites, subjecting

Figure 3: The first page of the four-page letter enclosed in Figure 1.

The Cresson family descended from Pierre Cresson, a Huguenot who came to America in 1657. The family adopted the Quaker faith, and Elliott became a highly successful lawyer, specializing in the legal transfer of property. The family owned farms in nearby counties, and at age 17, a year after his father's death, Warder was sent to work on their farms in Chester and Darby, Pennsylvania.

A boy of strict Quaker upbringing, he was thrifty, a committed worker, and attentive to learning a great deal of agriculture, an asset that would become a driving force in his future life in Palestine.

He returned to his family in Philadelphia at age 21, and two years later married Elizabeth Townsend. The couple acquired 49 acres at Gwynedd, Pennsylvania, built a homestead and created a quite successful farm, while having seven children, one of whom died in childhood.

The first half of the 19th century was a time of immense religious ferment in America. Evangelical faiths drew tremendous excitement from the independent-minded pioneering new Americans colonizing the East and across the Alleghenies, even as far as the Mississippi.

Traditional orthodoxy, particularly among established Protestant faiths, was challenged by more freethinking, frontier self-reliance, and internalization of religious beliefs, as an alternative to established group canonical religious practice. This dramatic change, not unlike the events centuries early with the Reformation, reached even the Quaker faith.

By age 29, Warder Cresson began to doubt his Quaker beliefs, putting his thoughts down in a number of religious tracts, questioning the same issues described above among Lutherans, Congregationalists and other traditional Protestant faiths.

He espoused emphasis on inner faith, attacked privilege and wealth, opposed "Pharisaic traditions," externalities, and railed against a lack of concern for uplifting the poor and suffering.

His attendance at Quaker meetings declined and in short order he became estranged from the Quaker faith, even as his writings became more vituperative against "Babylon" amongst Quakerism.

He particularly took offense at monopolizing of wealth in business, endowments of colleges for the privileged, denigration of the farmer and laborer, lack of concern for the under classes, and, oppressive wages for workers.

Through his communications it became evident that Cresson had an exceptionally well-honed knowledge of scripture and was both confidently conversant, as well as willing, to challenge the status quo dialectically.

Over the ensuing decade he would explore alternative faiths including the Shakers, Mormons,

Seventh Day Adventists and Campbellites. It remained controversial as to whether he actually joined these faiths in membership or participated as an inquirer, a subject that would come up at his subsequent lunacy trial. It was reported, however that he did indeed "harangue" individuals on the streets of Philadelphia warning of an impending apocalypse.

It was in the 1830s that he made acquaintances with Rabbi Isaac Leeser of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, and, with the Jewish writer, Mordecai Manuel Noah, the latter a proponent for the return of Jews to Zion on both religious and political grounds.

Cresson became convinced that the time was approaching when God would cause the Jews of the world to return to Palestine as a prelude to the "end of the days."

In the spring of 1844, with this belief firmly established in his mind, Warder Cresson decided to leave his family and move to Jerusalem: "I left the wife of my youth and six lovely children, and an excellent farm, with everything comfortable around me. I left all these in pursuit of truth and for the sake of Truth alone."²

Cresson wrote further that: "signs of the times announce extraordinary events about to take place to the Jews," and, emphasized that only one's physical presence in Palestine would bring about these prophecies. "I want to give of my time, labor and money to Israel, now despised, but which will soon be a Crown of Glory and a Royal Diadem in the hand of God."

And now we arrive at the first of two moments of truth alluded to in the title of our article. Before sailing for Palestine, Cresson traveled to Washington, D.C., where he applied to become the first American Consul to Jerusalem. He sought and received the support of two influential Philadelphians, Dr. I.A. Birkey, and Congressman E. Joy Morris, to recommend him for such a post.

A letter from Morris to Secretary of State John C. Calhoun on May 1, 1844, stated that: "Jerusalem is now much frequented by Americans." With Cresson having volunteered to assume the post without compensation, he was notified on May 17, 1844 of his official appointment.³

As mentioned earlier, it was a commission of extremely short duration, if at all; for, a week later, Samuel D. Ingham of New Hope, Pennsylvania, who had previously been Secretary of the Treasury under President Andrew Jackson, informed Secretary of State Calhoun that: "the Consul has been laboring under an aberration of mind for many years; his mania is of the religious species...and has gone round the compass...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.”^{3,4}

The outcome was a communication from Calhoun to Cresson that on the instruction by the President “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.”⁴

Too late! Unaware of the revocation, Warder Cresson was on his way to Jerusalem carrying a caged white dove of peace in one hand and an American flag in the other.

Cresson would spend the next four years in Jerusalem. He would insist in rebuttal to visitors who questioned his appointment that he had been approved as consul for Jerusalem and Syria, and that he had been confirmed by the Senate; nor had he received notice from the State Department to the contrary.

“It has cost me many a dollar and I did not wish any salary. My object in going to Washington...was in order to obtain protection for myself...and the poor, oppressed Jews.”

Half a year after the decision had been made that no post was to be established in Jerusalem, he continued to act as a U.S. Consul.

Cresson immersed himself in Jewish affairs issuing certificates of “protection” for Jews in Turkish-controlled Palestine; contesting the Christian missionary work to convert Jews; and, excoriating missionaries for their wealthy lifestyles.

Several visiting dignitaries would write disparagingly of his activities and strange behavior, but these criticisms failed to discourage his activities. Gradually, his attachment to Judaism became complete, and at the same time he came to doubt the authenticity of the New Testament.

Eventually, denying the divinity of Jesus, Warder Cresson, age 49, on March 28, 1848, underwent circumcision and converted to Judaism.

His great esteem for biblical Ruth—her story mentioned several times in our acquired letter—would be remarked upon in his momentous decision: “I remained in Jerusalem in my former faith until the 28th day of March, 1848, when I became fully satisfied that I could never obtain Strength and Rest, but by doing as Ruth did...and saying to Naomi (The Jewish Church), ‘Entreat me not to leave thee...for whither thou goest I will go.’”^{2,3}

On May 7, 1848, Cresson, having convinced himself that his family would join him in his new faith, sailed home to Philadelphia. He had assumed a new name, Michael Boaz Israel, and was intent on

informing the American public of the possibilities of establishing Jewish settlements in Palestine. His family, however, would confront him with an entirely contrary set of circumstances.

In his four-year absence his wife, Elizabeth, had become an Episcopalian, and his hopes for reconciliation were dashed by her enmity. Elizabeth, to whom he had given power of attorney, had sold the family farm and Cresson’s personal belongings, leaving him penniless. All but one of his children became estranged from him.

With these events, he then revoked Elizabeth’s power of attorney. The battle lines were drawn; Cresson took his belongings and moved in with a Jewish friend, Isaac Asch. The worst was yet to come.

On May 15, 1849, Elizabeth and other family members, claiming that Warder wanted to rebuild the Temple on Mount Moriah, and was incompetent to handle his business affairs, lodged a charge of lunacy against him. A Sheriff’s jury of six men (a jury selected by a sheriff to, among other causes, ascertain the mental condition of an alleged lunatic) quickly issued a verdict of insanity.

Records indicate that Cresson did not spend time in confinement. His attorney, Gen. Horatio Hubbell, successfully appealed the verdict, and two years later, on May 13, 1851, the second component of the title to this article would make its way to the forefront.

The trial was brought before Judge Edward King, with Elizabeth Cresson’s lawyer, David Paul Brown, listing the charges that were the basis of finding Warder Cresson a lunatic and incapable of handling his own affairs.

Chief among the numerous charges were that he had joined almost a half-dozen Christian sects before leaving for Palestine and converting to Judaism; that he had applied epithets to the Savior; that he took to Jerusalem a white dove and an American flag and declared himself a “door-keeper in the House of the Lord;” that he claimed to have seen angels at the time of his circumcision; and, that he attempted by violent means to convert his wife and children to the Jewish religion.

The defense responded to the charge of fiduciary incompetence by showing that Cresson had improved all of his properties from the time of his marriage; had provided faithfully for his family even in his years of absence in Palestine; that members of his family respected his business acumen to the point of asking for his assistance in their financial affairs; that numerous witnesses affirmed that he conducted his business affairs with a sane mind; and, rather than neglecting his family, had both signed over half the mortgage on his property, and, proposed an amicable settlement to save costs of litigation.



Figure 4: The Mount of Olives in Jerusalem where Warder Cresson is buried.

He denied making threats to his wife, and, as far as the claim that he wanted to rebuild the Temple, it must have created quite some laughter in the court when he stated that he could not have promised such a thing, since the Turkish Mosque of Omar still occupied that location.

Seventy-three witnesses were called by Cresson's legal team, including a most unusual defense witness, Peter A. Browne, a scientist who claimed that the study of the color of hair roots under a microscope could determine the sanity or insanity of an individual.

He submitted hundreds of samples and determinations from individuals supporting his conclusions to the jury and stated that Cresson's results showed that he was free of mental aberrations. The press was favorably impressed with his testimony, and the public was engrossed with the insanity issues, while also titillated with Cresson's religious wanderings. Newspapers throughout the country reported on the daily events in the courtroom.

Nine witnesses testified against Cresson, of which five were family members. In final presentation arguments, their lawyer, David Brown, was credited with a spirited summation, although criticism was made that he pandered to religious prejudice.

The closing speech by Horatio Hubbell, however, generated the most favorable press comments. Hubbell made the issue of religious freedom his centerpiece. Why should Cresson be attacked for his conversion to Judaism, "that old and venerable faith whose

institutions were founded amid the solitude of Sinai... whose history exhibits them tenaciously preserving the golden thread of their religion?"

It was the right of Americans to worship as they please, he stated, and he drew a sharp distinction between eccentric behavior and mental disease. He denied that Cresson had joined many sects and questioned whether sincere inquiry into the various beliefs of faiths was wrong: "God help the honest and conscientious inquirer...without incurring the danger of being branded a madman."³

Among other impressive rebuttals that Hubbell made to the charges against his client, the most stinging was his showing through a number of examples that anti-Semitism was the basis of the family's antagonism toward Cresson: "To dare embrace Judaism was something beyond comprehension."

Judge King's charge to the jury emphasized that jurors could not take into consideration religious beliefs in determination of insanity. His remark was as a thunderclap. One reporter wrote: "What? A Jew to have constitutional rights of conscience? Vulgar bigotry stood appalled."

It took but a short while for the jury to exonerate Warder Cresson on all charges. The press unanimously favored the outcome, and one reporter mused that had Cresson become a Roman Catholic the family would have likely acquiesced!

Cresson divorced his wife in 1852, returned to Jerusalem as Michael Boaz Israel, and obtained an

extensive farm in the Valley of Rephaim. In the mid-1850s he married Rachel Moleano, a Sephardic Jew, and two children would come from this marriage, although neither lived to adulthood.

Cresson spent the rest of his life formulating plans for agricultural development in Palestine that would produce the abundance of food necessary for large numbers of Jews to immigrate to Palestine. His model design, far ahead of its time, but one that would prove ever so successful beginning a half-century later, could not draw sufficient financial support.

Warder **Marshall** died on October 27, 1860. He was buried on the Mount of Olives (Figure 4) with what was described as, “such honors as are paid only to a prominent rabbi.”

Over the decades, the location of his gravesite would be lost. Then, in 2013, a man who said he was a descendant of Cresson’s brother came to the Elad Association that had been working on a computerized map of the Mount of Olives Cemetery and tombstone inscriptions.

Turning up nothing under the name “Cresson,” they searched the name “Boaz” revealing the location of both Cresson and his wife’s graves. The tombstone reads: ‘The man who fears God, who came to shelter him under the wing of the Shechinah.’⁵

Warder Cresson resides for eternity under the divine presence of God—the Shechinah (Figure 5).

A very strange man, indeed. But, think for a moment. In a world propelled by both factual experience and supernatural beliefs, how easy is it to discern divisions, and where?

Ponder as long as you will, we suspect for many the question will remain enigmatic despite long nights of thought.

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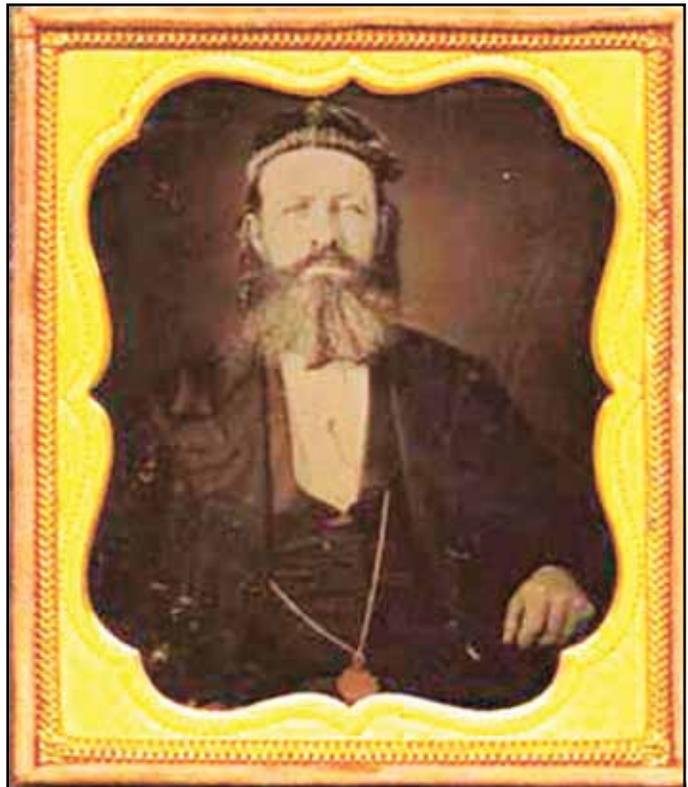


Figure 5:

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