CHAPTER ONE

LITERARY RESPONSES TO HEBREW CHRISTIANITY

The majority of Jewish people in nineteenth-century Britain were involved in a process of assimilation or acculturation and most of those who embraced Christianity were content to worship in a Gentile milieu despite being enjoined by the Old and New Testament scriptures to maintain their national distinctiveness and consequently their leadership position in the Christian church. Members of the Jewish community regarded these believers as apostates and Gentile Christians viewed them ambivalently as historically and eschatologically influential but of no particular contemporary significance in Britain. These contrasting and conflicting perceptions are reflected in the historiography. Jewish, and Gentile Christian writers for the most part view Hebrew Christianity as a marginal movement, while Jewish Christian historians regard the movement as central to salvation history and the development of what later became known as Messianic Judaism.

They employ an apologetic approach to create a “whig” history of the movement in which there is a direct and continuous line of development from the establishment of the Children of Abraham association in 1813 to the first steps in the foundation of an International Hebrew Christian Alliance at the beginning of the twentieth century. This monograph challenges the assumption of such an account by

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3 Isaiah 59:20–1; Romans 11:17–8.
7 See, for example, R. I. Fleischer, So Great a Cloud of Witnesses (London: privately published, 1996), p. 22.
offering an exploratory narrative of the major institutions and ideologies in the genesis and intermittent development of the British Hebrew Christian movement. The history of such a movement cannot be divorced from the theology of its participants and the author maintains that the theological context of the book can be found, in the New Testament scriptures, in Paul's Letter to the Romans 11:11–24. Here Paul compares the spiritual heritage of Israel to the olive tree and suggests that it is into this tree that both Jewish and Gentile Christians have been brought. The tree, however, belongs to the Jews—"their own olive tree"—and the emphasis is on what God intends to do for and through them for world blessing. The eleventh chapter of the book of Romans reveals that Israel's rejection is neither total nor final.

1.1 Models of Hebrew Christianity

Clive Staples Lewis, Gentile Christian writer and former Professor of Mediaeval and Renaissance Literature at the University of Cambridge, considers this theme in the foreword to Smoke on the Mountain (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) by Joy Davidman:

In a sense the converted Jew is the only normal human being in the world. To him, in the first instance, the promises were made and he has availed himself of them. He calls Abraham his father by hereditary right as well as by divine courtesy. He has taken the whole syllabus in order as it was set; eaten the dinner according to the menu. Everyone else is, from one point of view, a special case, dealt with under emergency regulations. To us Christians the unconverted Jew (I mean no offence) must appear as a Christian manqué; someone very carefully prepared for a certain destiny and then missing it. And we ourselves, we christened gentiles, are after all the graft, the wild vine, possessing "joys not promised to our birth," though perhaps we do not think of this so often as we might. And when the Jew does come in he brings with him into the fold dispositions different from, and complementary of, ours; as St. Paul envisages in Ephesians 2:14–9.

Theological justification for the retention by Hebrew Christians of traditional Jewish customs is provided by the Jewish Christian writer and Presbyterian pastor, Aaron Adolf Saphir. Drawing in part from the book of Romans, chapters 9–11, he maintains that three factors pro-