THE TWO HOUSES OF ISRAEL

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In this contribution I shall deal with the question, who or what are the ‘two houses of Israel’ which are mentioned in Isa 8:14:

He shall be for a sanctuary, a stone men strike against, a rock men stumble over for the two Houses of Israel, and a trap and a snare for those who dwell in Jerusalem.

Although I know that Hugh Williamson already has his own view and has commented on this verse, I would like to take this opportunity since when I was writing this contribution, only the first volume of his excellent commentary on the book of Isaiah had been published.1 Because of this I am free to express my humble remarks on that verse on which he himself has certainly already reflected. Nonetheless, I hope that he will enjoy my remarks, whether we coincidentally agree with each other or whether he has already disproved my view on this verse.

I. THE EXEGETICAL PROBLEM

Already the textual tradition in the Septuagint and in the Targum prove that behind the expression ‘the two houses of Israel,’ which is unique in the Old Testament, there is an exegetical problem.2 The Septuagint divides the text in vv. 13–14 differently and changes its meaning. The translator either omitted the end of v. 13 (ויהי לאבון נגב ולצופר מכשול לשני בתימ ישראל למכשול ליהודים ירושלם) or did not find it in the Hebrew Vorlage; instead, v. 14—in line with Isa 28:16 and the Targum—begins with a conditional clause, opening with this the way for the pious to escape all terrors as announced in v. 14. This, however, does not apply to the ‘two houses of Israel,’ which the Septuagint connects with the following and reads in accordance with v. 17 with the singular ‘house of Jacob’:

2 See Joseph Ziegler, Untersuchungen zur Septuaginta des Buches Isaias (ATA 12/3; Münster: Aschendorff, 1934), 95–96.
If you trust in him, he will become your holy precinct, and you will not encounter him as a stumbling caused by a stone nor as a fall caused by a rock, but the house of Jacob is in a trap, and those who sit in Jerusalem are in a pit.

καὶ ἐὰν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ πεποιθὼς ἦς, ἔσται σοι εἰς ἁγίασμα, καὶ οὐχ ὡς λίθου προσκόμματι συναντήσεσθε αὐτῷ οὔθε ὡς πέτρας πτώματι· ὁ δὲ οἶκος Ιακωβ ἐν παγίδι, καὶ ἐν κοιλάσματι ἐγκαθήμενοι ἐν Ιερουσαλημ.

The ‘house of Jacob’ in the Greek text seems to be not as problematic as the ‘two houses of Israel,’ probably because the expression is more common in biblical language. It stands for the twelve sons of Jacob and, therefore, for God’s people, the social group of the twelve tribes of Israel, defined by family relation with religious connotations. Here the ‘house’ does not have a political but a social meaning; it refers to a family group. But the expression ‘the two houses of Israel’ in the Hebrew text is different. ‘The house’ in the singular, just like the name ‘Israel,’ could mean both the ‘house of Israel’ in the sense of the ‘house of Jacob,’ i.e., the people of the twelve sons of Jacob-Israel, or the ‘house of Israel’ as opposed to the ‘house of Judah’, i.e., the northern kingdom. In the plural, however, ‘house’ has clearly a political meaning and refers to the dynasty. This does not comply with the genitive in the construct state in which ‘Israel’ can only refer to God’s people as a whole.

Since the Septuagint is the easier version, which also brings the text into line with 8:17, this variant must be considered as secondary according to the rules of textual criticism. Following the more difficult and original reading of the Hebrew text, the two ways of using the word ‘house’ and the word ‘Israel’ seem to be intermingled: the political meaning of ‘house’ with the social meaning of the name ‘Israel.’ Thus, the question arises, what is the reason for the semantic combination and what is actually the meaning of this unique formulation in the book of Isaiah?

Unfortunately, I cannot look it up in Williamson’s commentary yet. Therefore, I started to leaf through some older or newer commentaries and some monographs on the book of Isaiah in order to find out what exegetes had to say or noticed about this phrase. The result was not really surprising. Some do not seem to see a problem here at all and do not waste a word on the phrase in question.³ Quite naturally, either the political