house, housing, sachet

1. Statistics
As a container qualifying adoption in this work, only once in the Nebiim.

2a. Literal Use
Though it is one of the commonest words in the Bible, יַעַבְּרָא is less often used in a literal sense than one might expect. When this is the case, it designates a building the walls of which were made of clay bricks (Exod. 1:14; cf. Job 4:19) or, if more money could be spent, hewn stones (1 Kgs 6:7; Ps. 118:22, etc.). For many other structural elements, especially the roof and the pillars supporting it, wood was employed (cf. e.g. 1 Kgs 5:22-23). יַעַבְּרָא might designate a house where a man and his family dwelled (Deut. 6:7), but also a palace (Gen. 12:15; Jer. 39:8), a temple (Exod. 23:19; 1 Sam. 31:10), or part of such a larger complex (e.g. 2 Kgs 23:7).

2b. Figurative Use
In all languages of the world ‘house’ is a root metaphor. It immediately evokes the idea of complex construction, the notion of protection against the outside world, feelings of love, tenderness and companionable family life that are experienced in it. As such, the house has become a rich source of networks of interrelated metaphors which Lakoff and Johnson have described by the keywords CONTAINER and BUILDING (Lakoff & Johnson1980).

It is not always simple, however, to distinguish between literal and figurative use. For example, one of the most common uses of יַעַבְּרָא is to designate a tribe, a dynasty or the nation as a whole, ‘the house of Israel’, for example. Yet a writer could deliberately fall back on the literal meaning to stress the perishable nature of this ‘house’, as is the case in Jer. 18:6 (see also Job 4:19). The metaphor is temporarily suspended to become an object of clay again. As will be explained below, יַעַבְּרָא was occasionally used as a neutral metaphor for several different types of casing. One might compare the use of ‘house, housing’ in modern English.

In this handbook it is not necessary to discuss all metaphorical uses of the term ‘house’. We shall confine ourselves to the passages
where utensils might be involved.

In Isa. 3:18-23 an enumeration is given of jewelry and cosmetics of the women of Jerusalem. The means to enhance their beauty will be taken away because of their wanton behaviour. In v. 20 סְּפָרָה, ‘houses of the סְּפָרָה’ are mentioned. This expression is paralleled by the word סְּפָרָה, ‘amulets’, but ‘to work intuitively from a straightforward rendering of the words to arrive at some kind of amulet’ (Williamson 2006, 281) is not commendable. Probably סְּפָרָה means ‘scent’ here, as in Prov. 27:9. This is strongly suggested by the distant parallelism with סְּפָרָה ‘perfume, spices’ in Isa. 3:24. These scent ‘houses’, then, were little sachets (→ נוֹרָה), filled with perfumes like myrrh (Cant. 5:1), to attract their lovers (rather than to restore their spirits after fainting, contrast Astley 1929, 79-83; Driver 1937, 69-70). Such sachets were worn around the neck (Keel 1984 and 1986), like the amulets (סְּפָרָה) mentioned immediately after. Customary translations like ‘bottles’, ‘flasks’, or ‘phials’ must be abandoned as anachronisms.

If we accept this rendering ‘spice sachets’ also for סְּפָרָה in 2 Kgs 23:7 there is no need for the dubious etymologising based on Arab. batt anymore.

In the description of the table to be used in the tabernacle, סְּפָרָה refers to the holders for the poles סְּפָרָה that were used to carry the table (Exod. 25:27; 30:4; 37:14, 27; 38:5) and in the description of the tabernacle to a holder for bars סְּפָרָה (Exod. 26:29; 36:34). In 1 Kgs 18:32 סְּפָרָה is apparently used as a neutral word ‘container’ for an unusual trench able to hold two seah-measures of seed. Similarly, Ezek. 1:27 describes the unusual sight of a fire contained in a kind of housing. In all these cases it is unlikely we are dealing with utensils.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested as a utensil.

4. Cognates

In several Semitic languages *baytu occurs in meanings comparable to ‘casing, housing, container’.

Akkadian: bitu ‘house’ can also designate a ‘container’ (CAD (B), 292, sub 4). Used for the holder of the lamp (biṯ nūrī, Salonen,
Hausgeräte, Bd. 1, 134), as well as for small bottles containing a kind of perfume, oil or other cosmetic fluid (Salonen, Hausgeräte, Bd. 1, 118-9; Pappi 2008, 573), a woollen sack (bīt lubūrī, Salonen, Hausgeräte, Bd. 1, 179) or the holder of the spindle ((bīt pilaqqi, Salonen, Hausgeräte, Bd. 1, 153). The special meaning of ‘scent’ for the word ṣem is supported by Akkadian nipšu ‘scent’, Gilg. 11:304 (see also Von Soden, AHW, Bd. 2, 792; CAD (N)2, 248). The word seems to be derived from napāšu ‘to breath’.

Old and Imperial Aramaic: Hoftijzer & Jongeling, DNSI, 156: by(t) ‘house’; 163: ‘receptacle’, but the reading and interpretation are uncertain.

Postbiblical Hebrew: In rabbinical Hebrew הב can designate receptacles, like a case for tephilin and an ink-pot. Cf. Levy, WTM, Bd. 1, 224-5; Jastrow, DTT, 167-8.

Classical Arabic: bayt can have the meaning ‘case, box, covering, sheath’ (Wehr, DMWA, 84; Dozy, SDA, t. 1, 131).

Ethiopic: Geez bēt, Dillmann, LL Ae, 536: ‘receptaculum, theca’.

5. Ancient Versions
The ancient versions were simply guessing after the meaning of most of the technical terms used in Isa. 3:18-23. This also applies to ṣem in 3:20. Only ṣ with olfactoriola, ‘scent-bottles’, comes close. The renderings of the versions in the case of Exod. 25:27 are discussed by Houtman 2000.

6. Judaic Sources
See above, under Postbiblical Hebrew.

7. Illustrations

8. Archaeological Remarks
Keel 1986, 68, states that the house, housing, sachet in Isa. 3:20 must be compared to the pouch of myrrh in Song 1:13, worn between the breasts. This pouch was probably made of cloth so that the scent could spread through the air. Keel calls it an amulet and thinks that it consisted of two pieces of cloth, wrapped around different
things, and joined together by a horizontally placed needle. In the bundles were fragrant flowers, hennah, lily, fruits, seed, resin, myrrh, frankincense, etc. (LÁ, Bd. 4, 910-1).

Dalman (AuS, Bd. 5, 339) describes the also as containers for oil or scent.

[Further comments will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion
The common word was sometimes used as a metaphorical designation of receptacles or casings. In Isa. 3:20 the word designates a sachet filled with aromatic spices that women used to hang between their breasts by way of perfume.

10. Bibliography

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