key

1. Statistics
Attested in Judg. 3:25; Isa. 22:22; 1 Chron. 9:27.

2a. Literal Use
In the dramatic events of Judges 3:15-30 a key-role is played by the תֵּמ. Many details of the story and of its scene of action remain uncertain, as the Hebrew is not always clear. King Eglon of Moab is murdered by the left-handed Benjamite Ehud, in the roof chamber (הַיַּלְדֵּי; cf. 2 Sam. 19:1 [18:33]) of his palace. He had ordered his servants out when Ehud hinted at a secret message (דָּבָר), and had risen from his seat (כֵּן) as Ehud announced a word of God (דְּבָרָא אֱלֹהִים) – thus presenting him with the opportunity to kill him with the sword hidden on his right thigh (vv. 19-21). Eglon’s fat (cf. v. 17b) closed over the blade (בָּלָד) of Ehud’s sword and Ehud closed the doors of the roof chamber upon him as he went out into the gallery (ו. 22-23; both times כָּוָר בְּכָר) and he bolted <them> (לֹא). He had gone out when the servants came in; as they saw the doors of the roof chamber bolted (לָוַה), they waited reverently, supposing that he was relieving himself (v. 24). Finally, when – after an embarrassing (תַּרְדִּי בְּרִי, cf. 2 Kgs. 2:17; 8:11) period of waiting – he did not open the doors, they took the key and opened <them> (לֹא), and found their master laying dead on the floor (v. 25) - but Ehud had escaped while they tarried (v. 26).

In connection with locking doors, which could be opened with a תֵּמ, both כָּוָר (‘to close, shut’) and לָוַה (‘to lock, bolt’, cf. 2 Sam. 13:17-18) are used. The problem is: did Ehud lock the main entrance of the room from within and then escaped through a back-door (Budde 1897, 31), or did he just go out, closed and bolted the doors, thereupon facing the waiting servants who, still ignorant of his deed, let him go unimpeded? The latter seems the preferable interpretation of לָוַה, as it usually seems to imply going on, after closing the doors, in the same direction (e.g., when entering, Jud. 9:51 and 2 Kgs. 4:4-5, after √כ ‘to fly’, √ב
or √לתרפ; here, when leaving, after √לת[.v. 24]). In that case it must have been possible to close and bolt the doors inside when going out, so that they could only be opened from the outside by means of a key (Dirksen 1990, 35). This seems to exclude the interpretation of לִקָּב as ‘to lock a door with straps’ (German ‘zubinden’, cf. לִקָּב in the sense of ‘to fix a sandal with straps’), as suggested by KBL, 621b, and HALAT, 666a. Rather one is inclined to think of the closing system with bolt and key with corresponding pins and holes as described for more modern times by Dalman, AuS, Bd. 7, 52-54 (cf. 122, 172; and 68-72 for Judg. 3:25).

1 Chron. 9, ‘the closing chapter of the Chronicler’s introductory genealogies’, ‘gives a summary of the members of the restored community after the exile’ (Williamson 1982, 87). The text runs more or less parallel with Neh. 11:3-19. However, when arriving at the gatekeepers (הָסְפִּיטִים) in v. 17 (Neh. 11:19), the agreement stops rather abruptly. Neh. 11:20 switches over to the inhabitants of the other towns of Judah (returning, however, immediately to Ophel and Jerusalem in vv. 21ff.), whereas 1 Chron. 9:17ff. dwell on the theme of the מִשְׁפַּט, far beyond the scope of the foregoing summary. According to most scholars, this section ends with v. 26a, and is succeeded by a more general catalogue of temple dignitaries in vv. 26b-33. After v. 26b ‘They were in charge of the chambers and the treasures of the house of God’, v. 27 continues: ‘they passed the night (לָשָׁנָה) round about (מִרְבַּע, cf. Num. 11:24, 1 Sam. 26:5) the house of God, מִשְׁפַּט מִשְׁפַּט תָּלְקִיד, ‘as they bore the duty of watching it and were responsible for opening it’ (Moffatt 1935), ‘and that <waw-explicativum, cf. GKC, § 154a, n.(b)> every morning’. ‘They’ are the Levites of v. 26a and probably the מַטְרָך is the key on the doors at the entrance (הַצָּבָה) of the house of God (cf. 1 Kgs. 6:33-34 and ס [below, Section 5]). But it is also possible to return once again to the theme of the gatekeepers: they were ‘lodging in the vicinity of the house of God’ (Moffatt 1935) and the key, which they had to administer, was the key of the gates (שָׁפֵר, v. 23 [and 26 ס]).

In Egypt, the vizier ‘let open the gates of the house of the king so that all who wanted to enter could enter and all who wanted to go out could go out’ (De Vaux, IAT), t. 1, 200).
Now there is no mention of gates in the description of the temple of Solomon and its inner and outer courts (1 Kgs. 6:36, 7:12), but so much the more in Ezekiel’s vision of a new temple (Ezek. 40 [48x], etc.; see the extensive article שער in HALAT, 1491-94 [1493b]). Moreover, the closing of gates is mentioned. The outer gate on the east side of the sanctuary is shut and shall remain shut (כרת, Ezek. 44:1-2), whereas the eastern gate of the inner court shall be closed on working days, but open on the sabbath (Ezek. 46:1, 2, 12). Therefore the question of H.J. Kraus, when discussing the שער of Psalm 24:7-10: ‘des heiligen Bezirkes oder des Tempels?’ (Kraus 1960, 205), also holds good for 1 Chron. 9:27.

In fact, שער in 1 Chron. 9:27 could also have been classified with the next section (‘Figurative Use’), as not so much the key itself is meant as the daily opening of the doors/gates as first thing in the morning after passing the night in the precincts of the temple, as is explained expressis verbis in the שער (see below, Section 5.). Several modern translations have rendered in that sense, as a kind of verbal form of שער: ‘opening’, etc.

2b. Figurative Use

The same question, but then the other way round, could be asked in connection with Isa. 22:22 ‘And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David’ (שער). Are we dealing here with only a symbolic mentioning of the key (‘I will lay on his shoulders the duty of the Davidic palace’, Moffatt 1935), or is a real key intended? According to many commentators the key in question must have been a wooden instrument of considerable size and weight, so that it had to be carried on the shoulder (so e.g. Schoors 1972, 137; Snijders 1979, 220; Wildberger 1978, 849: ‘Die Schlüssel der damaligen Zeit waren durchaus so groß, daß sie auf die Schulter gelegt werden konnten’; Beuken 2007, 278). In the case of Judges 3 there is no suggestion of such an impressive utensil. But 1 Chron. 9:27 seems to underline the importance of opening the doors or the gates as an official function.

Here, in Isa. 22:22, it is the token of dignity bestowed on Eliakim, son of Hilkiah, as he was destined to replace Shebna, who had fallen in disgrace, as 슐 (steward, governor; both men
also mentioned Isa. 36:3,11,22; 37:2 par.). De Vaux quotes in this connection the instructions of an Egyptian vizier who has to take care of opening the gates of the palace, ‘so that could enter who had to enter and could leave who had to leave’ (see above). In the case of Eliakim the same idea has been formulated negatively, more emphasizing the social authority of his function (cf. v. 21) than its practicability: ‘when he opens, none shall shut, and when he shuts, none shall open’ (מִבְּלֶגֶתַתָּו בִּלְבָּלִיתוֹ, v. 22b). These words were quoted literally in Rev. 3:7 and also had their impact on Mt 16:19 (cf. 18:18, 23:13; Joh. 20:23), the delegation of the keys of the kingdom of heaven by Jesus to Simon Peter.

Following v. 22, Isa. 22:23 is spoken in purely figurative language; ‘I will fasten him (like) a peg (or: tent-pin, → dt) in a sure place (Moffatt 1935: ‘in a firm wall’) and he will become a throne of honour to his father’s house’. On the other hand, v. 21 speaks realistically of Shebna’s robe and girdle (裨ָדֶה בָּדֶהוֹ, Moffatt 1935: ‘your vestment ... your sash’), with which Eliakim will be clothed as a token of his new authority. Thus for the interpretation of מִבְּלֶגֶתַתָּו just in between these verses, both possibilities seem to remain open. In the same way ‘house of David’ could mean just plainly ‘the palace’ (so e.g. Schoors 1972, 136; Snijders 1979, 220; Beuken 2007, 278: ‘königlichen Wohnsitz’), ‘the temple’, or even ‘the household of David’, but, already when spoken by the prophet, it could also have referred to the normative and formative past (cf. e.g. Procksch 1930, 291; Wildberger 1978, 849) and for that reason the whole expression מִבְּלֶגֶתַתָּו could have had an eschatological and messianic undertone from the beginning. Already in כ both the figurative and the literal interpretation have got their expression (see Section 5.).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates
מִבְּלֶגֶתַתָּו is a maqtel-form (< *maqtel, GKC, §85i; BL, 492q-r [מִבְּלֶגֶתַתָּו “Schlüssel” ... und eine Reihe anderer Werkzeuge’]; Joüon, GHB, §88 L d,h) of מִבְּלֶגֶת, ‘to open’, which is common in most Semitic languages (Orel & Stolbova, HSED, 425-6). Below only relatively close correspondences are noted.
In Isa. 22:22 the stat. cstr. is כִּשְׂמֶשׁ, not כִּשְׁמֶשׁ, as would be expected (dissimilation? Cf. BL 542m for both possibilities [HALAT, 585b]). In TeNaKh it is masc. (cf. K. Albrecht, ‘Das Geschlecht der Hebräischen Hauptwörter’ [ZAW 15, 313-25, and 16, 41-121], [16] 93), but H. Rosenberg, ‘Zum Geschlecht der hebräischen Hauptwörter’ (ZAW 25, 325-39), 334, shows that in the Talmud (Tam. III 6 [189a6] and Kel. XIV 8 [198b29]) it is sometimes fem. (mss. Ven. and Lowe, respectively).

Other terms for closing instruments are כִּשְׁמֶשׁ, ‘bar’, Deut. 3:5, 1 Sam. 23:7; Jud. 16:3, Ps. 147:13, Neh. 3:3,6,13-15 (on gates); 1 Kgs 4:13 (bronze), Isa. 45:2, Ps. 107:16 (iron), etc. (mostly of wood, cf. Josephus, Bell. Jud. 4, 4;6; 6, 5,3); further כִּשְׁמָשׁ, ‘lock’, Deut. 33:25+, and כִּשְׁמָשׁ, ‘lock, bolt’, Song of Songs 5:5 (!), Neh. 3:3,6,13-15+, both from the root כִּשְׁמ, ‘to lock’ (cf. Dalman, AuS, Bd. 7, 70f.).

AKKADIAN: Even though the etymologically related verb petû is often used with doors and gates, its derivatives napt étu ‘key, small saw’ and naptû ‘part of a lock’ occur in lexical texts only (CAD (N) 1, 324). The normal word for ‘key’ in Akkadian is namzaqu.

UGARITIC: In a scribal exercise mpth ‘key’ occurs (KTU 5.22:12, cf. Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DULAT, 566-7). In this text ḫ represents h.

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: כִּשְׁמֶשׁ ‘key’ (Dalman, ANHT, 247).

JEWISH ARAMAIC: כִּשְׁמֶשׁ ‘key’ (Sokoloff, DIPA, 324).

CLASSICAL ARABIC: miftāh, miftāh ‘key, instrument for opening’ (Belot 570a; Lane, AEL, 2329).

MODERN SOUTH ARABIC: Soqotri miftāh ‘key’ (Leslau, LSoq, 344); Mehri meftēh ‘key’ (Johnstone, ML, 106); Jibbali muftēh ‘key’ (Johnstone, JL, 65).

MODERN PALESTINIAN ARABIC: muftāh ‘key’ (Barthélemy, 592; Elihai, DAPP, 88).

ETHIOPIAN: Geez maftēh ‘instrument for opening (key)’ (Leslau, CDG, 170).
5. Ancient Versions

and other Greek versions: Judg. 3:25 τὴν κλείδα ‘the key’; 1 Chron. 9:27 ἐπὶ τὸν κλείδων (plur.). As to Isa. 22:22, a double translation has been preserved: καὶ δῶσω τὴν δόξαν Δαυὶδ αὐτῷ, ‘and I will give him the glory of David’, and καὶ δῶσω τὴν κλείδαν[ν] οἶκον Δαυὶδ ‘and I will give him the key of the house of David’. Cod. B has the first, figurative interpretation of τεμένος as δόξα (GELS-L, 119b: ‘opinion, estimation, repute’, or [mostly] ‘richess, honour, glory; brightness, splendour’; cf. ThWNT, Bd. 2, 245-48). In B the first half of v. 22b, ἵ ἂν τεμένος οὖν ἔσται, ἀντιλέγων (continued literally with καὶ κλείσαι καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ἀνοιγὼν). a, A and others have the literal translation (with καὶ ἀνοίξει καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ἀνοικεῖον), or combinations of the figurative and the literal translation (see the editions of Swete, Rahlfs and Ziegler for further details). As the literal translation figures already in Rev. 3:7, this interpretation has old claims too.

on Jud. 3:25 κλείσω ‘key’. Like κ, κ has an interpretative translation in Isa 22:22: ἵ ἂν τεμένος οὖν ἔσται, ἀντιλέγων, ‘I will give the key of the sanctuary and the power of the house of David in his hand’. Possibly this reflects the royal priesthood of the Hasmonean era (van der Kooij 1981, 162). In 1 Chron. 9:27 Sperber’s edition has the Greek loanword κλεῖσις (‘the keys’, plur., cf. κ and σ).

Jud. 3:25 and Isa. 22:22 both times plur. ἑγεῖς ‘keys’ (with s g. yamē, thus plur.; in Jud. 3:25 12a1fam omits the s g. yamē, thus opting for sing.; no variants in Isa 22:22). Chron., which has a very ‘wild’ text in Syriac, substitutes ʾl tab‘ ‘over the gate’ for ʾl tab ʾl in 1 Chron. 9:27.

Jud. 3:25 and Isa. 22:22 literally clavem, but 1 Chron. 9:27 interpretatively aperirent ‘they opened’.

6. Judaic Sources

The Masada Hebrew text of Sir. 42:6b runs ‘(be not ashamed of a seal to keep a foolish wife at home)’, וט続く ידיה ראות מכות ‘and
of a key where there are many hands’, cf. *DCH*, vol. 5, 434a.

As has already been indicated in Section 2b, Isa. 22:22 underlies the crucial (‘key’)-text Mt. 16:19 and similar texts about binding and unbinding in the N.T. (abundance of rabbinic quotations in *Strack & Billerbeck* 1922, 738-47). Apart from the citation in Rev. 3:7, the ‘keys of Death and Hades’ are mentioned in Rev. 1:18, and the ‘key of the (pit [φώταξ] of the) Abyssos (‘bottomless pit’, RSV)’ in Rev. 9:1, 20:1, cf. Hen. 42 Rec B (*ThWNT*, Bd. 3, 745, with notes 24-26 for rabbinic references). See also Luke 11:52 ‘you have taken away the key of knowledge’ (*ibid.*, 746-7). Three keys are reserved exclusively for God (or his messenger, who are one, m. Ber. V.5): that for rain (cf. Deut. 28:12 ‘The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, etc.’; 1 Kgs. 17:1; 18:1 [Elijah]: ‘when the heaven was shut up three years and six months’, Luke 4:25); that for birth (cf. Gen. 30:22 [Rachel]); and that for raising from death (cf. 1 Kgs. 17:17; Ezek. 37:13) – R. Jochanan, Ta’an. 2a, cf. Sanh. 113a; Gen. R. 73 (46d), Deut. R. 7 (204b), Midr. Ps. 78.5 (173b), etc., Apoc. Bar. 5:5, ARN 4, etc., cf. *Strack & Billerbeck* 1922, 737 (*ad Matth. 16:19*).

As for 1 Chron. 9:27, Dalman quotes m. Tam. I.1: the elder priests slept in the heating room of the sanctuary with the keys of the inner temple court in their hands. The door of the temple was opened with golden keys (m. Tam. III.6, 7; *AuS*, Bd. 7, 71, 73).

The lock on a front door belonged to the house and was sold together with it, but the key was kept with the furniture (t. B. Bat. III.1, B. Bat. IV.3). The lock has a case (נֵפָס), with a bolt or bar (דָּמָם), in which the key (נַפִּים) could be stuck (shoven?) (m. Kel. XVI.7; t. ‘Erub. X.1). The key has taps (נִפָּסָה) and holes (נִפָּסָה); with these the pins of the case, that fitted in the corresponding holes of the bolt/bar could be removed, so that the door could be opened (m. Kel. XIV 8, etc.; Krauss, *TA*, BD. 1, 41; Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 7, 73; see also 53-4).

### 7. Illustrations

Because there existed several different types of lock and key, some with big keys, others with small keys, it is impossible to offer illustrations covering all of them. Moreover, since reliable archae-
ological specimens from Israel are lacking, most reconstructions rest on some ancient Egyptian and modern Arabic parallels, e.g. Dalman, AuS, Bd. 7, Fig. 12 and 13 (cf. pp. 122, 172); Avitzur, 164, Fig. 424; Shitran, EM, vol. 5, 38; King & Stager, LBI, 33, Fig. 18.

8. Archaeological Remarks

As far as I know, no keys from biblical times have been preserved in Israel which is no surprise since normally keys were made of wood. The little that can be said from an archaeological point of view is found in K. Galling & H. Rösel, BRL\(^2\), 349. Galling, BRL\(^1\) (1937), col. 460 (art. ‘Schlüssel’: ‘Man kann also von einem Hebeschlüssel im Gegensatz zu unserem Dreh-Schl. sprechen’ [omitted in BRL\(^2\), 349])

9. Conclusion

In the Old Testament there is no lack of reference to opening (\(\sqrt\text{{jtp}}\)) or closing (\(\sqrt\text{{rgs}}\)) of doors, gates, a window (Gen. 8:7), the sluices (Gen. 7:11), or doors (Ps. 78:23) of heaven (and of eyes, ears, etc.); in Isa. 45:1 it is said of Kores that the Lord will open doors before him and gates will not be closed. Only twice, however, a key is mentioned in this connection: moreover, one of these places, 1 Chron. 9:27, is rather dubious, as \(\text{נמא}\) could also be explained as a kind of verbal form of \(\text{נמא}\). Besides, it is not clear whether the key of the house of God (vv. 26, 27a) or that of the gates of the temple court is meant. Thus there remains only Jud. 3:25 as a clear case of a key used as an instrument: in order to open the doors of the ‘upper chamber’ that Ehud had closed on his escape from the murder of king Eglon of Moab. The fact that the doors could be opened from within and again closed and locked (from the outside?, v. 23), without making use of the key, whereas the servants could enter only with the aid of the key, forms a crucial point of the story. It also tells us something about the construction and the form of the lock in question, and perhaps also of the locks of those days in general.

Despite the general consensus with regard to the meaning ‘key’, the exact shape of keys remains elusive. If future archaeological evidence does not point into another direction, Dalman’s
description and illustration of the locks in the Orient in his days still seems to give the most acceptable impression. Some archaeological evidence from Egypt supports the idea that not much can have been changed with regard to the construction of keys and locks.

Most exegesis add to this picture of the key in Old Testament times, that ‘the key of the House of David’ placed on the shoulder of Eliakim must have been of considerable weight and size. However, since several types of locks and keys seem to have existed, it is by no means certain that all keys were that big and heavy.

The key of Isa. 22:22, whether taken literally or purely symbolically, in this context clearly has the connotation of authority, as a token of the high position of the maior domus. Some ancient versions betray that the translators were aware of this extra dimension (Є and the double rendering of ₪).

Whereas the key of heaven as a symbol of authority figures only sporadically in later Jewish thought (Section 6), it has taken on considerable importance in the NT and in later Christianity.

Personal Note: While preparing this essay, I attended the investiture of the new vicar of the church of our village. He was given a big key, with the words: you can use this key in two ways, to close (the past) and to open (the future). This rather unexpected coincidence made me aware of what a powerful symbol the key always has been, and still can be for the way we are dealing with our religion: either for closing ourselves from the rest of the world, thus becoming a source of distrust and hate, death and destruction, or for opening ourselves to the world, employing our creative abilities for responsibility and love, justice and peace.

10. Bibliography
they add: ’als Zeichen d. Autorität’ – HAHAT, 719: ‘Schlüssel 
... z. Zeichen d. Autorität über d. Schulter getragen Jes22,22’ – 
HALAT, 585b: ‘Schlüssel’ (but ad 1 Chron. 9:27: 1. הָעַלְיוֹן מַעְטֹרָה 
< *מִשְׁמְרָה [585a]: ‘Öffnen’ [opening of the lips, Prov. 8:6]); ad 
Isa. 22:22: ‘als Amtszeichen auf d. Schulter getragen’ (carried 
upon the shoulder, sign of office) – HAWAT, 239a: ‘Schlüssel’ 
– HCHAT, Bd. 1, 772: ‘Werkzeug zum Thüröffen, Schlüssel’ – 
HWAT, 370: ‘der Schlüssel ... als Zeichen der Amtswürde für 
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