cleft, branch, crutch

1. Statistics

As a designation of a utensil the word is thought to occur only in 1 Kings 18:21: ‘How long will you go limping on two crutches?’ If so, it seems likely that it is identical or closely related to הָלָל כָּפֹת 1. cleft; 2. branch, bough (see below). The traditional translation, however, runs: ‘How long will you go limping with two different opinions?’ (e.g. σ’, ν, Luther, KJV, ASV, RSV, JPS, NIV) and this expression has become proverbial in many languages.

2a. Literal Use
If the word is indeed identical or closely related to הָלָל כָּפֹת 1. cleft; 2. branch, bough (see below), the literal use is attested 6 times in the Neviim.

2b. Figurative Use
The meaning of the word in 1 Kgs 18:21 is unclear due to the problems of the context. ‘Crutches (made from branches)’ was proposed by Joüon 1908 and again by Keel 1972, as fitting the traditional meaning of the verb הָסַפ in the sense of ‘to limp’. The question would refer to a proverb which uses ‘crutches’ in a metaphorical way and denunciates the attitude of making no choice, while the crutches, in this case, would point to the deities involved, i.e. YHWH and Baal. Since YHWH could indeed be designated as a supporting staff ($→$ הָגִּינָה) the prophet’s criticism is directed not towards the use of supporting staffs as such, but to the fact that two unequal crutches are used.

De Vaux 1941, however, would see here a reference to the ritual dance performed in honour of Baal (cf. 1 Kings 19:18: ‘bending the knee to Baal’; cf. 6 below). Gerleman 1976, on the contrary, basing himself on a different meaning of the verb הָסַפ, namely as ‘to strike against violently, to rebound’, returned more or less to the traditional interpretation of הָלָל כָּפֹת as an abstract noun: ‘sides, alternatives’. The prophet would reproach the Israelites to rebound against both YHWH and Baal so much so as to be repudiated by both deities.
König, *HAWAT*, 305, has a fairly elaborate paragraph on this lemma:

If it is admissable – and it is, cf. *SLOGC*, §§ 11.4, 14.2-5, 16.5; *HAHAT*, 894 – to compare Arab. √ša‘aba, ‘to collect, separate, divide’, it would also be possible to point to the Arab. noun šu‘bat, ‘space between two things, cleft, branch growing out apart’, and also: ‘a staff having at his head two forking portions or projections’ (Lane, *AEL*, vol. 4, 1556). Such staffs with forked upper ends might well have served as crutches supporting a person under the armpits (cf. Joüon and Keel). The advantage of this solution is that it is in line with the meaning of the existing Hebrew nouns כף, 1. cleft; 2. branch, bough, and יפף, ‘bough, branch’, as well as the denominative verb √πי, ‘to lop off boughs’. The gemination of the ב in יפף is no obstacle to this explanation (cf. *GBH* § 18d-g). For further cognates see section 4 below.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates
SEMITIC: Klein, *CEDHL*, 452, s.v. כף assumes the following meanings for Biblical Hebrew: 1. cleft. 2. branch, bough, but s.v. יכף ‘division, divided opinion’ he appears to be reluctant to connect the two. From early times on scholars have compared יפרף in Job 4:13 (see also 21:2) which is supposed to mean ‘opinions, disquieting thoughts’ (see e.g. *HWAT*, 464). Subsequently it seemed admissable to regard יפרף ‘twig’ (Ezek. 31:5; cf. *HAHAT*, 903) and יפרפע ‘disquieting thoughts’ (Ps. 94:19; 139:23; Clines 1989, 111) as dissimilated forms of the same root. See also יפרפע (Ps.
119:113), usually translated ‘double-minded men’.

It is indeed possible that √s’p, dissimilated √sr‘p // √s‘p, dissimilated √sr‘p, and Arab. √s‘b (see section 2 above) are all variants of the same original √s‘b/p (cf. SLOGC, §§16.1-6, 20) with the meaning ‘to branch off, divide into two directions’.

SYRIAC: sar‘ef ‘to branch out’, sarefītā ‘branches, a branching out, fork; layers, suckers’ (Payne Smith (Margoliouth), CSD, 392); sur‘āfā ‘a branch, subdivision, ramification’ (Margoliouth), CSD, 371).

OLD ARABIC: Perhaps Sabean √s‘b, ‘tribal group, community’ (Beeston, SD, 130-1; Biella, DOSA, 520). See also the modern South Arabic cognates cited by Leslau, ESAC, 37; HAHAT, 903.

CLASSICAL ARABIC: ʃa‘b ‘collection, separation, division, branch, crack, tribe’ (Lane, AEL, vol. 4, 1556); ʃu‘bat ‘space between two things, cleft, branch growing out apart’, and also: ‘a staff having at his head two forking portions or projections’ (Lane, AEL, vol. 4, 1556), discussed above. Less likely sa‘af ‘palm-branches’ (Lane, AEL, vol. 4, 1365). See also Palestinian Arabic ʃa‘be ‘Gabelhözer’ (Dalman, AuS, Bd. 3, 241).

5. Ancient Versions

∅ and other Greek versions: The versions mirror the exegetical impasse of modern times. ∅ translates with a word for a body part: γνώκα ‘the part behind the thigh and knee, ham’ (GELS-L, 211). This results in the translation: ‘to halt on both feet’. σ has ζωήκαλός, ‘doubt, uncertainty of mind’.

צ: פלג ‘half, division’.

צ: pelgūtā ‘half, part’ or pālgūtā ‘part, division, duplicity’ (Payne Smith (Margoliouth), CSD, 447).

ו: Like צ en צ has interpreted the term as an abstract noun: Usquequo claudicatis in duas partes?

6. Judaic Sources

Not attested in Jesus Sirach, Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic sources.
7. Illustrations
No suggestions.

8. Archaeological Remarks
[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion
On the somewhat uncertain basis of etymological comparison the meaning ‘crutch’ seems acceptable. Other proposals that have found some support from the ancient versions are ‘part’, ‘side’ and ‘uncertainty, divided opinion’, but all these alternatives seem to have been inspired by the same root ‘to branch off, divide in two parts’. 

10. Bibliography
See in addition to the literature cited with → חפץ:
963: ‘partes, opiniones divisae’.

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