

## key

## מפתח

**1. Statistics**

Torah: 0. Nebiim: 2. Ketubim: 1. Total: 3.

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 מפתח. 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 Benjaminite Ehud, in the roof chamber (על־יה; cf. 2 Sam. 19:1 [18:33]) of his palace. He had ordered his servants out when Ehud hinted at a secret message (דְּבַר־סֵתֶר), and had risen from his seat (בִּסֵּא) as Ehud announced a word of God (דְּבַר־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 (לְהַב) of Ehud's sword and Ehud closed the doors of the roof chamber upon him as he went out into the gallery [?] (vv. 22-23; both times סָגַר בְּעַד and he bolted <them> (וַיַּעַל). He had gone out when the servants came in; as they saw the doors of the roof chamber bolted (וַיַּעֲלוּ), they waited reverently, supposing that he was relieving himself (v. 24). Finally, when – after an embarrassing (עַד־בוֹשׁ, cf. 2 Kgs. 2:17; 8:11) period of waiting – he did not open the doors, they took the key and opened <them> (וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־הַמִּפְתָּח וַיִּפְתְּחוּ), 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 מפתח, both סָגַר ('to close, shut') and נָעַל ('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 סָגַר בְּעַד, 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 נָוַח 'to fly', בּוֹא

or  $\sqrt{\text{הלך}}$ ; here, when leaving, after  $\sqrt{\text{יצא}}$  [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  $\text{נָעַל}$  as ‘to lock a door with straps’ (German ‘zubinden’, cf.  $\text{נָעַל}$  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 ( $\text{הַשְׁעָרִים}$ ) 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  $\text{שְׁעָרִים}$ , 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 ( $\text{לַיְלֵינוּ}$ ) round about ( $\text{סְבִיבוֹת}$ , cf. Num. 11:24, 1 Sam. 26:5) the house of God,  $\text{כִּי־עָלֵיהֶם מְשָׁמְרֵת וְהֵם עַל־הַמִּפְתָּח וְלִבְקָר}$ ,  $\text{לִבְקָר}$ , ‘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  $\text{מִפְתָּח}$  is the key on the doors at the entrance ( $\text{פְּתָח}$ ) of the house of God (cf. 1 Kgs. 6:33-34 and  $\text{ט}$  [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 ( $\text{שְׁעָרִים}$ , v. 23 [and 26  $\text{ט}$ ]).

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 שַׁעַר 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 (שָׁנִיר, 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 שַׁעֲרִים of Psalm 24:7-10: 'des heiligen Bezirkes oder des Tempels?' (Kraus 1960, 205), also holds good for 1 Chron. 9:27.

In fact, עַל-הַמִּפְתָּח 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 6 (see below, Section 5.). Several modern translations have rendered in that sense, as a kind of verbal form of פָּתַח: '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' (וְנָתַתִּי מִפְתָּח בַּיַּת-דָּוִד עַל-שִׁכְמוֹ). 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 סֹכֵן (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’ (וּפְתַח וְאֵין סָגַר וְסָגַר וְאֵין פָּתַח, 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, → יָתֵד) 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 (בְּתִגְיָתוֹ וְאַבְנֵיטָיו, Moffatt 1935: ‘your vestment . . . your sash’), with which Eliakim will be clothed as a token of his new authority. Thus for the interpretation of מפתח 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 בְּיַדְדָּוִד מפתח could have had an eschatological and messianic undertone from the beginning. Already in 6 both the figurative and the literal interpretation have got their expression (see Section 5.).

### 3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

### 4. Cognates

מפתח is a *maqtēl*-form (< \**maqtīl*, *GKC*, § 85i; *BL*, 492q-r [‘מפתח “Schlüssel” . . . und eine Reihe anderer Werkzeuge’]; Joüon, *GHB*, § 88 L d,h) of √פתח, ‘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 מפתח, not מפתח, 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 ברִיחַ, ‘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 \*מנעל, ‘lock’, Deut. 33:25+, and מנעול, ‘lock, bolt’, Song of Songs 5:5 (!), Neh. 3:3,6,13-15+, both from the root נעל ‘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 *naptētu* ‘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 *mṣṣḥ* ‘key’ occurs (KTU 5.22:12, cf. Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, *DULAT*, 566-7). In this text ḥ represents *h*.

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

JEWISH ARAMAIC: מפתח ‘key’ (Sokoloff, *DJPA*, 324).

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

MODERN SOUTH ARABIC: Soqotri *miftāḥ* ‘key’ (Leslau, *LSoq*, 344); Mehri *meftēḥ* ‘key’ (Johnstone, *ML*, 106); Jibbāli *muftēḥ* ‘key’ (Johnstone, *JL*, 65).

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

ETHIOPIC: Geez *maftēḥ* ‘instrument for opening (key)’ (Leslau, *CDG*, 170).

## 5. Ancient Versions

Ⓞ and other Greek versions: Judg. 3:25 τὴν κλεῖδα ‘the key’; 1 Chron. 9:27 ἐπὶ τῶν κλειδῶν (plur.!). As to Isa. 22:22, a double translation has been preserved: καὶ δώσω τὴν δόξαν Δαυιδ ἀντῶ, ‘and I will give him the glory of David’, and καὶ δώσω τὴν κλεῖδα[ν] οἴκου Δαυιδ ‘and I will give him the key of the house of David’. Cod. B has the first, figurative interpretation of מפתח as δόξα (*GELS-L*, 119b: ‘opinion, estimation, repute’, or [mostly] ‘richness, honour, glory; brightness, splendour’; cf. *ThWNT*, Bd. 2, 245-48). In Ⓞ<sup>B</sup> the first half of v. 22b, יִאֲרֶה מִתְּחִלָּה אֶת־כֶּסֶף, has been rendered interpretatively too: καὶ ἄρξει, καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀντιλέγων (continued literally with καὶ κλείσει καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀνοίγων). Ⓞ<sup>a</sup>, Ⓞ<sup>A</sup> and others have the literal translation (with καὶ ἀνοίξει καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀποκείων in v. 22b<sup>a</sup>), 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.

Ⓞ: Ⓞ<sup>J</sup> on Jud. 3:25 מפתח ‘key’. Like Ⓞ, Ⓞ has an interpretative translation in Isa 22:22: וְאֶת־יָדִי מִפֶּתַח בַּיִת מִקְדָּשׁא וְשֵׁלֶטֶן בַּיִת דְּוֹד בִּידֵיהּ, ‘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 אַקלידיא (‘the keys’, plur., cf. Ⓞ and Ⓞ).

Ⓞ: Jud. 3:25 and Isa. 22:22 both times plur. <sup>ʿ</sup>qlyd’ ‘keys’ (with <sup>s</sup>yamē, thus plur.; in Jud. 3:25 12a1fam omits the <sup>s</sup>yamē, thus opting for sing.; no variants in Isa 22:22). Ⓞ Chron., which has a very ‘wild’ text in Syriac, substitutes <sup>l</sup>tar<sup>c</sup> ‘over the gate’ for מפתח 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)’, ומקום ידים רבוה מפתח, ‘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 [φρέαρ] 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 (בית), with a bolt or bar (נגר), in which the key (מפתח) could be stuck (shoven?) (m. Kel. XVI.7; t. 'Erub. X.1). The key has taps (חפיים) and holes (נקבים); 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*<sup>2</sup>, 349. Galling, *BRL*<sup>1</sup> (1937), col. 460 (art. 'Schlüssel': 'Man kann also von einem Hebe-Schl. im Gegensatz zu unserem Dreh-Schl. sprechen' [omitted in *BRL*<sup>2</sup>, 349])

### 9. Conclusion

In the Old Testament there is no lack of reference to opening ( $\sqrt{\text{פתח}}$ ) or closing ( $\sqrt{\text{סגר}}$ ) 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  $\text{מפתח}$  could also be explained as a kind of verbal form of  $\text{פתח}$ . 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 exegetes 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 (⌘ 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

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1990 – *EM*, vol. 5, 35-39 – *GB*, 450a: ‘Schlüssel’; *ad* Isa. 22:22 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: l. ועליהם מפתחו < \*מפתח [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 Thüröffnen, Schlüssel’ – *HWAT*, 370: ‘der Schlüssel ... als Zeichen der Amtswürde für den Hausmeister’ – *ISBE*, vol. 3, 10-12 – *KBL*, 553a: ‘Schlüssel’ – Kraus 1960: H.J. Kraus, *Psalmen*, Bd. 1 (BK 15/1), Neukirchen 1960 – *LÄ*, Bd. 5, 658-61 (see also 256-257) – King & Stager, *LBI*, 31-33 – *LHA*, 462a: ‘clavis’; *ad* Isa. 22:22: ‘ut symbolum officii potestatis administrandae in domo’ – Kaddari, *MHH*, 650: מכשיר לפתיחת דלת – Moffatt 1935: J. Moffatt (ed.), *A New Translation of the Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*, London 1935 – Procksch 1930: O. Procksch, *Jesaja*, 1 (KAT, 9/1), Leipzig 1930 – *RLA*, Bd. ?, 361-2 – Schoors 1972: A. Schoors, *Jesaja* (BOT), Roermond 1972 – Snijders 1979: L.A. Snijders, *Jesaja* (POT), deel 1, Nijkerk 1969 – Strack & Billerbeck 1922: H.L. Strack & P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, Bd. 1, München 1922 – Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 1140a: ‘clavis, qua aperitur ianua’ – van der Kooij 1981: A. van der Kooij, *Die alten Textzeugen des Jesajabuches* (OBO, 35), Freiburg 1981 – Wildberger 1978: H. Wildberger, *Jesaja* (BK, 10/2), Neukirchen 1978 – Williamson 1982: H.G.M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* (NCBC), London 1982.

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