

“The keys of the house are delivered to those who are appointed to be stewards, that they may have the full power of opening and shutting according to their own pleasure. By ‘the house of David’ is meant “the royal house.” This mode of expression was customary among the people, because it had been promised to David that his kingdom would be forever (2 Sam. 7:13; Ps. 82:11-12). That is the reason why the kingdom was commonly called ‘*the house of David.*’”

The key is put in the singular number for keys. Though “*keys*” are usually carried in the hands, yet he says that they are laid on the shoulders, because he is describing an important charge. Yet, nothing more is meant than that the charge and the whole government of the house are committed to him, that he may regulate everything according to his pleasure; and we know that the delivering of keys is commonly regarded as a token of possession.

Some commentators have viewed this passage as referring to Christ, but improperly; for the Prophet draws a comparison between the two men, Shebna and Eliakim. Shebna shall be deprived of his office, and Eliakim shall succeed him. What has this to do with Christ? For Eliakim was not a type of Christ, and the Prophet does not here describe the hidden mystery, but borrows a comparison from the ordinary practice of men, as if the keys were delivered to one who has been appointed as steward, as has been already said. For the same reason Christ calls the office of teaching the word (Matt. 16:19), “*the keys of*

the kingdom of heaven;” so that it is idle and foolish to spend much time in endeavouring to find a hidden reason, when the matter is plain, and needs no ingenuity. The reason is, that ministers, by the preaching of the word, open the entrance to heaven, and lead to Christ, who alone is ‘the way’ (John 14:6). By *the keys*, therefore, he means here the government of the king’s house, because the principle charge of it would be delivered to Eliakim at the proper time.³

The key role of King Hezekiah’s new Prime Minister, Eliakim, underscores and foreshadows the key role Peter will play as the Prime Minister of Jesus the Christ under the New Covenant, according to Matt. 16:18-19.

1. Albright, The Anchor Bible, Matthew, 196.
2. F.F. Bruce, The Hard Sayings of Jesus (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 143-144.
3. John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Vol. 2, William Pringle, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 136-137.

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The Keys of the Kingdom

When Jesus used the term *keys of the kingdom*, he was quoting an extremely well-known verse from Isaiah, where the prophet is speaking to Shebna, household overseer of Hezekiah the king:

Thus says the Lord God of hosts, “*Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is over the household, and say to him: What have you to do here and whom have you here, that you have hewn here a tomb for yourself, you who hew a tomb on the height, and carve a habitation for yourself in the rock? Behold the Lord will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you, and whirl you round and round, and throw you like a ball into a wide land; there you shall die, and there shall be your splendid chariots, you shame of your master’s house. I will thrust you from your office, and you will be cast down from your station. In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkihah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your girdle on him, and will commit your authority to his hand; and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. And I will fasten him like a peg in a sure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father’s house. And they will hang on him the whole weight of his father’s*

house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons. In that day, says the Lord of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a sure place will give way; and it will be cut down and fall, and the burden that was upon it will be cut off, for the Lord has spoken.” (Isa. 22:15ff)

The *House of David* is a reference to the eternal dynasty prophesied to David by the oracle of Nathan in 2 Sam. 7:8-13. This becomes the basis for the development of royal Messianism throughout the Bible.

King David lived from BC 1000 to 961, and King Hezekiah lived from BC 715 to 687. Isaiah obviously was writing quite some time after the death of King David. By the time of Isaiah, the office of Master of the Palace was 300 years old and fully established as the highest office in the royal administration.

Isaiah is writing about an office that necessitated dynastic succession and authority. The symbols of dynastic authority are being bestowed upon Eliakim, who was a cabinet minister under the corrupt Shebna: First, the office of “*Master of the Palace*” or “*Prime Minister*”; second, a robe and a sash with the symbol of a key on the shoulder; third, a throne; fourth, the royal keys of the House of David.

At the time, Hezekiah was King of Israel. Because he was of the lineage of David, he was recognized as the son of David and ruler over the House of David. Kings of the ancient world had cabinet officers or royal

ministers, just as the presidents of the United States or the Queen of England have cabinet officers.

Shebna, who had proven to be unworthy, was the Prime Minister of King Hezekiah. The prideful Shebna had been presumptuously constructing an elaborate tomb for himself in the mountains. When Shebna was expelled from his office, it left the office vacant.

In addition to the dynastic succession to office of king, there was a dynastic succession to the office of Prime Minister. With the expulsion of Shebna, the office had to be filled, and Eliakim, a minister in the cabinet, was chosen.

The keys of the kingdom signify dynastic authority and dynastic succession. Why? Because it’s the key of David. The Prime Minister was responsible for the security of the kingdom. It was he who decided who could enter and who could leave the city. In the absence or incapacitation of the king, it was the Prime Minister who made the important decisions.

W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann insist it is doubtless in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus is citing the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 22, when He speaks of the keys of the kingdom:

Isa xxii 15ff. Undoubtedly lies behind this saying. *The keys* are the symbol of authority and Roland de Vaux (*Ancient Israel*, tr. By John McHugh [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961], pp. 129ff.) rightly sees here the same

authority as that vested in the vizier, the master of the house, the chamberlain, of the royal household in ancient Israel. Eliakim is described as having the same authority in Isaiah; it was Hilkiah’s position until he was ousted, and Jotham as regent is also described as “*over the household*” (2 Kings 15:5).¹

Other Protestant scholars readily admit when Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom, Peter received not only the Prime Minister’s office but dynastic succession and authority from the Son of David, the King of Israel.

The late Protestant biblical scholar F. F. Bruce also has written about the keys in Isaiah:

“And what about the ‘Keys of the Kingdom’? The Keys of a royal or noble establishment were entrusted to the chief steward or majordomo; he carried them on his shoulder in earlier times, and there they served as a badge of the authority entrusted to him. About 700 BC an oracle from God announced that this authority in the royal palace in Jerusalem was to be conferred on a man called Eliakim: ... (Isaiah 22:22). So in the new community which Jesus was about to build, Peter would be, so to speak, chief steward.”²

The sixteenth century Reformer, John Calvin, wrote the following commentary interpreting the keys in Isaiah 22:22:

