

SSH logins in practice: certificates vs OPKSSH

Erich Birngruber

FOSDEM'26

2026-02-01

Looking into SSH logins - why?

- Environment: Research Campus / University
- Goal: give hundreds of users access to a compute cluster
i.e. Linux hosts
- Challenge: hosts are accessed via SSH, but many or most clients
are unmanaged – unknown endpoint security

One answer to that is short lived credentials.
This can be implemented with certificates or tokens.

How are you using SSH?

The lab setup “ssh_lab”

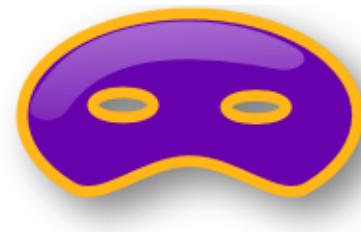
- Container environment to with various parts of infrastructure



Certificate Authority



Oauth ID provider / IDM



DNS



client



SSH server

Demo time ...

Conclusion

Certificates

- + short lived + oauth flow
- + host validation
- + core SSH features control
(forwarding, agent, etc.)

- CA setup required

(get over it, you need a 3rd party tool additional to SSH client)

OpenPubKey SSH

- + short lived + oauth flow
- + highly customizable policies
(also with claims)
- + use with multiple (existing) ID providers

- does not cover host verification

Thank you!

Time for questions

Resources

- SSH server: <https://www.openssh.org>
- IDM and OAuth provider: <https://kanidm.github.io/kanidm/stable/>
- Certificate Authority: <https://smallstep.com/docs/step-ca/>
- OpenPubkeySSH: <https://github.com/openpubkey/opkssh>
- DNS server: <https://dnsmasq.org>
- Container and orchestration: <https://podman.io/>
- The ssh_lab: https://github.com/CLIP-HPC/ssh_lab

Slides of last resort

Demo 1: password

[erich.birngruber@nbm-gmi-89 ssh_lab % ./demo1_passwd.sh
preparing, cleaning up...
Demo: SSH login with classic password

connect to server
password: "demo"

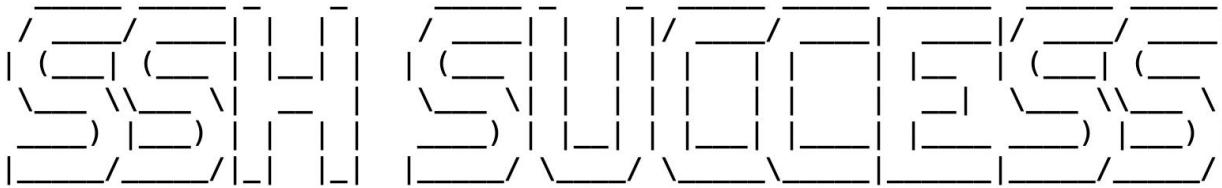
ssh -l pwuser server.example.com

observe: key confirmation
.ssh/config is empty, no presets
on second connect: no question for host key (it's known)

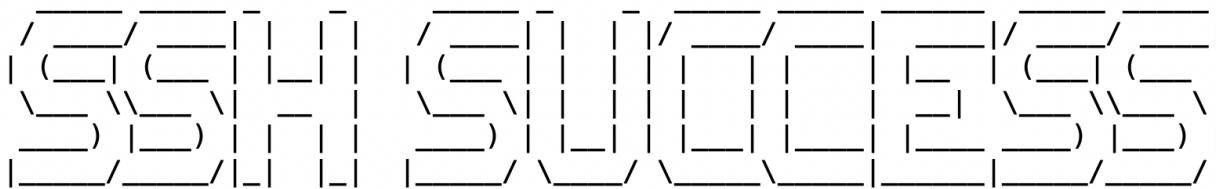
cat .ssh/known_hosts

password: "demo"
contains public host key of server.example.com

[[pwuser@client ~]\$
[[pwuser@client ~]\$
[[pwuser@client ~]\$ ssh -l pwuser server.example.com
The authenticity of host 'server.example.com (172.20.0.5)' can't be established.
ECDSA key fingerprint is: SHA256:jt1YUkKgCL28z1kZlrFS0vbyHb7Pt3tGgJA9ylAo6g4
This key is not known by any other names.
Are you sure you want to continue connecting (yes/no/[fingerprint])? yes
Warning: Permanently added 'server.example.com' (ECDSA) to the list of known hosts.
[pwuser@server.example.com's password:
server says,



```
[...dman - demo1_passwd.sh ~/projects/ssh_lab --zsh ~/projects/ssh_lab --zsh ... podman-compose up ... projects/ssh_lab --zsh ... +]  
[pwuser@client ~]$  
[pwuser@client ~]$ ssh -l pwuser server.example.com  
The authenticity of host 'server.example.com (172.20.0.5)' can't be established.  
ECDSA key fingerprint is: SHA256:jt1YUkKgCL28z1kZlrFS0vbyHb7Pt3tGgJA9ylAo6g4  
This key is not known by any other names.  
Are you sure you want to continue connecting (yes/no/[fingerprint])? yes  
Warning: Permanently added 'server.example.com' (ECDSA) to the list of known hosts.  
[pwuser@server.example.com's password:  
server says,
```



Congratulations, you're logged in now!

```
[23:28 pwuser@server ~]$  
[23:28 pwuser@server ~]$  
exit  
Connection to server.example.com closed.  
[pwuser@client ~]$ cat .ssh/known_hosts  
server.example.com ecdsa-sha2-nistp256 AAAAE2VjZHNhLXNoYTItbmlzdHAyNTYAAAAIbmlzdHAyNTYAAABBBPH  
Tuhj4EyrblTU7KDBxGyRgtFCbsJcgxjrxM1W/sjWmJ8PmsIjJVrISc6A0FGdrhoYdJKhfWZ4KmW5u0KKM9U=  
server.example.com ssh-rsa AAAAB3NzaC1yc2EAAAQABAAQGQCyuxNr0tj8tLmXQN/EjWwBgzm6DRz8HjSL1Mv  
AtxqDs2KR+BNH6lQz/t8CizBb0A/x8b2KXTlKRiXyFSAq+QssWmJG8IA5UIP48DGFLQtTJwT1xglxZEI2k4t00UHKIA9i  
Qs5o2IRMw5SKaccnXwR95vdfItZdwQjDaH4X0F/fL/G2m+IRADS6FYsE9pdxd3443m0JNuqM+Wt3oXdVnkXtv8C0IgUl0D  
llj/Y80/jkufXN6nAhvhr8YASvSsuCCzvhAAHZwahF0Zj99t9nC0AeHuwxRejIOSojnR1I+eWKYNMCzjoRDK7M5SHkI  
R71MfnZbHNTghG/wd0nEuBx/MJ11bQj0kL3sU0RWNqcCPvu3I22PJvtcWFYTxRNKmB3h5InPtHuygHI8q+3eQdzf5k6dnw  
4qs/r1r79sBJybHYlzJkk9wtAgQgFJabHkj1G6kTpnnq/hn+GSNC70daTjmS2ESoF48GxeF7lrj6F6d0KJemhgQEVR1AzMy  
6xTqK0=  
server.example.com ssh-ed25519 AAAAC3NzaC1lZDI1NTE5AAAAIGI7LCGSoFu9Z0oR/XqpQD1FSnwAevVzzuCAmo3  
YLalr  
[pwuser@client ~]$
```

Demo 2: pubkey

ssh_lab --zsh -- 127x35

~/.ssh_lab --zsh | ~/.ssh_lab --zsh | ...lab -- podman < podman-compose up | ~/.ssh_lab --zsh | +

```
# Demo: SSH login with public-key auth
#
# connect to server

ssh -l pubkeyuser server.example.com

# observe: does not ask password, but also on server no authorized_keys file

ls -la .ssh/

# check on the server how the password lookup is done:

cat /etc/ssh/sshd_config.d/pubkey.conf
# AuthorizedKeysFile none -> file will be ignored, user cannot place their own keys here
# otherwise: you could use from the client: ssh-copy-id

/usr/bin/kanidm_ssh_authorizedkeys_direct -D anonymous pubkeyuser # -> returns the pubkey of user
/usr/bin/kanidm_ssh_authorizedkeys_direct -D anonymous other_user # -> will return empty/error
# try out the public key lookup from identity management (oftentimes done by sss_ssh_authorizedkeys)
# risk: private key file on client might get compromised

[[pubkeyuser@client ~]$]
[[pubkeyuser@client ~]$]
[[pubkeyuser@client ~]$ ssh -l pubkeyuser server.example.com
The authenticity of host 'server.example.com (172.20.0.5)' can't be established.
ECDSA key fingerprint is: SHA256:jt1YUkKgCL28z1kZlrFS0vbyHb7Pt3tGgJA9ylA06g4
This key is not known by any other names.
Are you sure you want to continue connecting (yes/no/[fingerprint])? yes
Warning: Permanently added 'server.example.com' (ECDSA) to the list of known hosts.
server says,
```

ssh_lab -- zsh -- 127x35

~/projects/ssh_lab -- zsh | ~/projects/ssh_lab -- zsh | ~/projects/ssh_lab -- zsh | ...lab -- podman < podman-compose up | ~/projects/ssh_lab -- zsh | ... +

server says,



Congratulations, you're logged in now!

```
[23:31 pubkeyuser@server ~]$ [23:31 pubkeyuser@server ~]$ cat /etc/ssh/sshd_config.d/pubkey.conf
# pubkeyuser can only do passwordless auth, this is more secure
Match User pubkeyuser
    PasswordAuthentication no
    PubkeyAuthentication yes

    # we don't use keys file in user's home
    AuthorizedKeysFile none
    # alternative: user can add _public_ keys here
    # AuthorizedKeysFile ~/.ssh/authorized_keys

    # we fetch the ssh key from the idm server (or other sources), no need for authorized_keys file
    AuthorizedKeysCommand /usr/bin/kanidm_ssh_authorizedkeys_direct -D anonymous %u
[23:32 pubkeyuser@server ~]$ /usr/bin/kanidm_ssh_authorizedkeys_direct -D anonymous pubkeyuser
ssh-ed25519 AAAAC3NzaC1lZDI1NTE5AAAIUhjkMy3ft5LuvvuFzd/vDbHxYc0sadYDMxidXCDotk pubkeyuser@client.example.com
[23:32 pubkeyuser@server ~]$ [23:32 pubkeyuser@server ~]$ /usr/bin/kanidm_ssh_authorizedkeys_direct -D anonymous other_user
2026-01-30T23:32:50.762111Z ERROR kanidm_ssh_authorizedkeys_direct: Failed to retrieve SSH keys for other_user - Http(404, Some(NoMatchingEntries), "731ff205-c270-44f9-bc94-2a441a0f0c16")
Error: ()
[23:32 pubkeyuser@server ~]$ [23:32 pubkeyuser@server ~]$ exit
```

Demo 3: certificates

ssh_lab — podman • demo3_cert.sh — 127x35

...cts/ssh_lab — podman • demo3_cert.sh | ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh | ...lab — podman • podman-compose up | ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh | ... +

```
[erich.birngruber@nbm-gmi-89 ssh_lab % ./demo3_cert.sh
bootstrapping step CA config
The root certificate has been saved in /home/certuser/.step/certs/root_ca.crt.
The authority configuration has been saved in /home/certuser/.step/config/defaults.json.
installing SSH host CA
# get ssh credentials from the CA
step ssh login --provisioner idm
ssh server.example.com

# inspect credentials in ~/.ssh/
find ~/.ssh/

# list certificate in agent
ssh-add -l

# create keys and certificate:
step ssh certificate --provisioner idm demo ~/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo --insecure --no-password

# inspect credentials in ~/.ssh/
find ~/.ssh/

# inspect certificate, check lifetime
ssh-keygen -L -f ~/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo-cert.pub

# connect with cert file to server
ssh -i ~/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo-cert.pub server.example.com

# on the server check config
cat /etc/ssh/sshd_config.d/certuser.conf

Agent pid 104
[[certuser@client ~]$ step ssh login --provisioner idm
✓ Provisioner: idm (OIDC) [client: stepssh]
Cannot open a web browser on your platform.]
```

```
ssh_lab — podman • demo3_cert.sh — 127x35
...cts/ssh_lab — podman • demo3_cert.sh      ~/projects/ssh_lab — -zsh      .../projects/ssh_lab — -zsh      .../lab — podman • podman-compose up      .../projects/ssh_lab — -zsh      ...
[[certuser@client ~]$ step ssh login --provisioner idm
✓ Provisioner: idm (OIDC) [client: stepssh]
Cannot open a web browser on your platform.

Open a local web browser and visit:

https://idm.example.com:8443/ui/oauth2?client_id=stepssh&code_challenge=zqdYlf6HPAx93zQ9jJwY4JVCBnGby4cpjL-hWwZ6Hxs&code_challenge_method=S256&nonce=05dda360553baa0a0cf54df4c540372132c5be08602e36946b040f9132ddc124&redirect_uri=http%3A%2F%2F127.0.0.1%3A5000&response_type=code&scope=openid+email&state=DwWvuTWKC75t3fxq4bqMlbb5RbM9fKNw

✓ CA: https://ca.example.com:9000
✓ SSH Agent: yes
[[certuser@client ~]$ ssh server.example.com
server says,

Congratulations, you're logged in now!

[[23:37 certuser@server ~]$ exit
Connection to server.example.com closed.
[[certuser@client ~]$ find ~/.ssh/
/home/certuser/.ssh/
/home/certuser/.ssh/config
/home/certuser/.ssh/known_hosts
/home/certuser/.ssh/agent
/home/certuser/.ssh/agent/s.DXC6vDC5Eq.agent.veA2ETz6h8
[[certuser@client ~]$ ssh-add -
256 SHA256:M5kNd475wWw0HsNA7BCo7f8xVm9UYoE/mB6lBEnw/zY (ECDSA-CERT)
[[certuser@client ~]$
```

```
ssh_lab — podman • demo3_cert.sh — 127x35
...cts/ssh_lab — podman • demo3_cert.sh      ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh      ...lab — podman • podman-compose up      ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh      ...
[[certuser@client ~]$ step ssh certificate --provisioner idm demo ~/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo --insecure --no-password
✓ Provisioner: idm (OIDC) [client: stepssh]
Cannot open a web browser on your platform.

Open a local web browser and visit:

https://idm.example.com:8443/ui/oauth2?client_id=stepssh&code_challenge=5-nMbZ8qcIUj9Uewj4wJ_Rzs-JkUQZpgvsuMP2_LHxo&code_challenge_method=S256&nonce=96026332c7a0280e6f5d32ef4c6381f57d7cd8d8d9d461a271f0172c60e5037f&redirect_uri=http%3A%2F%2F127.0.0.1%3A5000&response_type=code&scope=openid+email&state=r190080xr0wGZIdgoLTbBXtCdvd6oM8l

✓ CA: https://ca.example.com:9000
✓ Private Key: /home/certuser/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo
✓ Public Key: /home/certuser/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo.pub
✓ Certificate: /home/certuser/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo-cert.pub
✓ SSH Agent: yes
[[certuser@client ~]$ ssh-keygen -L -f ~/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo-cert.pub
/home/certuser/.ssh/id_ecdsa_demo-cert.pub:
    Type: ecdsa-sha2-nistp256-cert-v01@openssh.com user certificate
    Public key: ECDSA-CERT SHA256:9DiabMYK53TX0zFzehmz4xM7JpD8Lyv0cn2YvzX5jS4
    Signing CA: ECDSA SHA256:RQralyQGBAEpFk6hmvtALEg1h9bbi/i/VhXWH0sa6M (using ecdsa-sha2-nistp256)
    Key ID: "certuser@example.com"
    Serial: 6255454290763442738
    Valid: from 2026-01-30T23:37:06 to 2026-01-31T15:38:06
    Principals:
        certuser
        certuser@example.com
    Critical Options: (none)
    Extensions:
        permit-X11-forwarding
        permit-agent-forwarding
        permit-port-forwarding
        permit-pty
        permit-user-rc
[[certuser@client ~]$
```


Demo 4: OPKSSH

ssh_lab — podman < demo4_opkssh.sh — 127x35

.../ssh_lab — podman < demo4_opkssh.sh | ~ /projects/ssh_lab — zsh | ...lab — podman < podman-compose up | ~ /projects/ssh_lab — zsh | ... +

```
[erich.birngruber@nbm-gmi-89 ssh_lab % ./demo4_opkssh.sh
# check OPKSSH config, run login (DNS match!)
cat .opk/config.yml
opkssh login

# something happened.... can we login now?
ssh -l opkuser server.example.com

# yes, we can – but how? also check server side
cat /etc/ssh/sshd_config.d/opkuser.conf

# check locally
find .ssh

# check what's in this cert
opkssh inspect ~/.ssh/id_ecdsa-cert.pub
./inspect.sh

# one more thing: SSHFP DNS records
dig SSHFP server.example.com

[opkuser@client ~]$ cat .opk/config.yml
# client config see https://github.com/openpubkey/opkssh/blob/main/docs/config.md

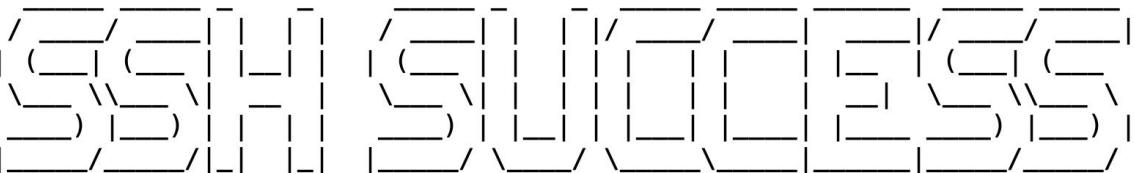
default_provider: demo
providers:
  # for this demo
  - alias: demo
    issuer: https://idm.example.com:8443/oauth2/openid/opkssh
    client_id: opkssh
    scopes: openid email profile
    access_type: offline
    prompt: consent
    redirect_uris:
```

ssh_lab — podman • demo4_opkssh.sh — 127x35

.../ssh_lab — podman • demo4_opkssh.sh ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh .../projects/ssh_lab — zsh .../lab — podman • podman-compose up .../projects/ssh_lab — zsh ...

```
- http://localhost:3000/login-callback
# - http://localhost:10001/login-callback
# - http://localhost:11110/login-callback

[[opkuser@client ~]$ opkssh login
INFO[000] listening on http://127.0.0.1:3000/
INFO[000] press ctrl+c to stop
INFO[000] Opening browser to http://localhost:3000/login
ERRO[000] Failed to open url: exec: "xdg-open": executable file not found in $PATH
Writing opk ssh public key to /home/opkuser/.ssh/id_ecdsa-cert.pub and corresponding secret key to /home/opkuser/.ssh/id_ecdsa
Keys generated for identity
Email, sub, issuer, audience:
opkuser@example.com 9f508b80-ea7c-4954-bb30-4bb251d5001b https://idm.example.com:8443/oauth2/openid/opkssh opkssh
[[opkuser@client ~]$ ssh -l opkuser server.example.com
The authenticity of host 'server.example.com (172.20.0.5)' can't be established.
ECDSA key fingerprint is: SHA256:jt1YUkKgCL28z1kZlrFS0vbyHb7Pt3tGgJA9ylAo6g4
Matching host key fingerprint found in DNS.
This key is not known by any other names.
Are you sure you want to continue connecting (yes/no/[fingerprint])? yes
Warning: Permanently added 'server.example.com' (ECDSA) to the list of known hosts.
server says,
```



Congratulations, you're logged in now!

[[23:43 opkuser@server ~]\$

ssh_lab — podman < demo4_opkssh.sh — 127x35

.../ssh_lab — podman < demo4_opkssh.sh | ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh | .../projects/ssh_lab — zsh | .../lab — podman < podman-compose up | .../projects/ssh_lab — zsh | ... +

```
[23:43 opkuser@server ~]$ cat /etc/ssh/sshd_config.d/opkuser.conf
# OpenPubkey specifics

Match User opkuser

AuthorizedKeysCommand /usr/local/bin/opkssh verify %u %k %t
AuthorizedKeysCommandUser nobody

[[23:43 opkuser@server ~]$
[[23:43 opkuser@server ~]$
exit
Connection to server.example.com closed.
[[opkuser@client ~]$
[[opkuser@client ~]$
[[opkuser@client ~]$ opkssh inspect ~/.ssh/id_ecdsa-cert.pub
--- SSH Certificate Information ---
Serial:          0
Type:            User Certificate
Key ID:          opkuser@example.com
Principals:      []
Valid After:     Not set
Valid Before:    Forever
Critical Options: map[]
Extensions:
  permit-pty:
  permit-user-rc:
  openpubkey-pkt: [PKToken data] 1242 bytes
  permit-X11-forwarding:
  permit-agent-forwarding:
  permit-port-forwarding:

--- PKToken Structure ---
Payload:
{
  "aud": "opkssh",
```

```
ssh_lab — podman - demo4_opkssh.sh - 127x35
.../ssh_lab — podman - demo4_opkssh.sh          ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh          ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh          ...lab — podman - podman-compose up      ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh          ...
+--- PKToken Structure ---
Payload:
{
  "aud": "opkssh",
  "azp": "opkssh",
  "email": "opkuser@example.com",
  "email_verified": true,
  "exp": 1769817475,
  "groups": [
    "allow_root",
    "important_user",
    "stepssh",
    "user"
  ],
  "iat": 1769816575,
  "iss": "https://idm.example.com:8443/oauth2/openid/opkssh",
  "jti": "55ea9208-16f4-4b03-9246-bbc00aeacd0c",
  "name": "OPK User",
  "nbf": 1769816575,
  "nonce": "5vEw72B9Hko65VEeV3gNh00SPuhPioH_7QSpC_ukSzc",
  "preferred_username": "opkuser@idm.example.com",
  "scopes": [
    "email",
    "openid",
    "profile"
  ],
  "sub": "9f508b80-ea7c-4954-bb30-4bb251d5001b"
}

--- Signature Information ---
Provider Signature (OP) exists
{
  "alg": "ES256",
  "kid": "eca6fbdd688a1d679a5e9dd184ea238e"
```

ssh_lab — podman < demo4_opkssh.sh — 127x35

.../ssh_lab — podman < demo4_opkssh.sh ~/projects/ssh_lab — zsh .../projects/ssh_lab — zsh .../lab — podman < podman-compose up .../projects/ssh_lab — zsh ...

```
--- Token Metadata ---
Issuer: https://idm.example.com:8443/oauth2/openid/opkssh
Audience: opkssh
Subject: 9f508b80-ea7c-4954-bb30-4bb251d5001b
Identity: 9f508b80-ea7c-4954-bb30-4bb251d5001b https://idm.example.com:8443/oauth2/openid/opkssh
Token Hash: rSAMhL6h5Q2mQkgRHvqReOs-pRHKmbEI8lga_Y7hqro
Provider Algorithm: ES256
[[opkuser@client ~]$]
[[opkuser@client ~]$]
[[opkuser@client ~]$ dig SSHFP server.example.com

; <>> DiG 9.20.18 <>> SSHFP server.example.com
;; global options: +cmd
;; Got answer:
;; ->>HEADER<<- opcode: QUERY, status: NOERROR, id: 10170
;; flags: qr aa rd ra; QUERY: 1, ANSWER: 6, AUTHORITY: 0, ADDITIONAL: 1

;; OPT PSEUDOSECTION:
; EDNS: version: 0, flags:; udp: 4096
;; QUESTION SECTION:
;server.example.com. IN SSHFP

;; ANSWER SECTION:
server.example.com. 0 IN SSHFP 4 2 F0F7C23A9086F9984E624466B15EFE1B243164A8C96A24F029D34FD7 90BBA6C5
server.example.com. 0 IN SSHFP 4 1 CF880618201B8E97563DB8D5ACEFBC01D6EB3D89
server.example.com. 0 IN SSHFP 3 2 8EDD585242A008BDBCCF591996B1523AF6F21DBECFB77B4680903DCA 5028EA0E
server.example.com. 0 IN SSHFP 3 1 ECC60371F699E35BBAD9B4BFF1C078C2D9A9D81E
server.example.com. 0 IN SSHFP 1 2 F9B1B0BABECBBB45BB1F5FEB6418B7BD27AED547B9DFC1DE74E8AA91 3D2DB9CD
server.example.com. 0 IN SSHFP 1 1 64F20B2C19647FB91271BB920EAAB4011E7EB870

;; Query time: 2 msec
;; SERVER: 172.20.0.1#53(172.20.0.1) (UDP)
;; WHEN: Fri Jan 30 23:44:12 UTC 2026
;; MSG SIZE rcvd: 287
```

Thanks for the fish!