

# “Before You Were Born, I consecrated You”: Consecration and the Vocation of the Prophet: A Study of Jeremiah 1:5

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## Introduction

The focus of this year’s conference on what the bible teaches us with regard to vocation and vows presents a great opportunity for a review of some biblical models of response to God’s call, vocation, with a view to reimagining and reawakening their lessons for the response of present day consecrated persons to God’s call. In the biblical tradition, people were called to be/do different things: kings, judges, priests, etc.—all of them, messengers and servants of God. Prophetic vocation happens to be the most enduring of all, beginning with Moses up until the New Testament times and certainly, to date.<sup>1</sup> In addition, biblical prophetic vocation also presents us with the classical characteristic of the divine call of human beings to service (Exod 3; Isa 6:1-13).

One of the most wholesome responses to such a divine call may be said to be that of the prophet Jeremiah, who was called by Yahweh to minister to Judah and to the nations in the midst of religious and political controversies and turmoil.<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah is said to have had approximately 40 years of ministry (627-587 BC). The import of that calculation must be kept in mind since the very phenomenon of the presentation of Jeremiah as a “prophet like Moses”<sup>3</sup> may have played a role in the determination of the exact timing of his long ministry.

The phenomenal call to that ministry by means of a pre-birth consecration that is subsequently declared,<sup>4</sup> and the prophet’s response to that call at a very difficult and challenging time in the history of God’s people, is the focus of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

While the study focuses primarily on Jer 1:5, the connection of this focus verse to its surrounding literary context and to the entire corpus of the prophet would be indispensable tools in the unfolding of the lessons that are to be learned by today’s consecrated men and women from Jeremiah’s personal experience and encounters. That the life and activities of the prophet unfolded in the context of his encounters with a particular people, God’s people, is also a very

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<sup>1</sup> One must not lose sight of the history of OT prophecy that notes that Abraham was the first person to be designated a prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen 20:6-7). And beyond Jesus, the prophet *per excellence* and fullest representation of the Hebrew traditional longing for the emergence of a prophet like Moses (indeed he is much more), Christians are considered to be bearers of that prophetic vocation in a real sense until this day.

<sup>2</sup> Guy P. Couturier, “Jeremiah,” in *NJBC* (eds. Raymond Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy, Eaglewood Cliffs, New Jersey; Prentice Hall, 1990) 18:1-121 (pgs. 265-297), esp. 18:41. See also the proposal of a cosmic dimension by Kathleen M. O’Connor, who noted that Jeremiah had an “expansive vision of the domain of the creator” in both human and non-human scope (“The Prophet Jeremiah and Exclusive Loyalty to God,” in *Int* [April 2005]: 132-34).

<sup>3</sup> John W. Miller, *Meet the Prophets: A Beginner’s Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 163.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent P. Branick (*Understanding the Prophets and Their Books* {New York: Paulist, 2012}, 143) notes that “at the time of this experience, the call of God is a *fait accompli*. It already happened perhaps eighteen years earlier—depending on our guess of how old the ‘youth’ (*na’ar*), Jeremiah, is here.”

<sup>5</sup> For a concise background of the times during which Jeremiah’s ministry took place, see Jack R. Lundbom’s article on “Jeremiah,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 3: H-J; eds. David Noel Freedman *et al.*; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:684-698, esp. 685-86.

important aspect of our consideration, since ministry would be without its proper objectives if it is not directed toward human beings and particular situations. So, it is not surprising that Jeremiah was perennially personal and sensitive about Yahweh's love for his people. And he was also equally profoundly aware of the peoples' duty toward Yahweh, through the covenant ties.<sup>6</sup>

The presentation of the call narrative at the very beginning of the prophetic book, unlike those of Isaiah and Amos, underscores the importance of the pericopé as an overture to the entire ministry of Jeremiah. Every word, incident, and encounter in the book is foreshadowed in this encounter with YHWH.<sup>7</sup> The rest of the book lays out the prophet's response to YHWH's call in the different but often challenging circumstances and times.

Another indication that the very first pericopé of the book is an overture to the entire work is the intended relationship between the name of the prophet and his vocation. The name, *yirměyāhu*, associated with the compounding of *Yah* with the verb, *rûm* (*yarum*) and therefore translated as "Yahweh has exalted," or in the mind of some scholars, with the verb, *rāmâ*, which is translated, "Yahweh has established," irrespective of the etymological choice of the reader, links the vocation of the one that YHWH has established and exalted in consecration to his very name, in such a way that everyone of his words, actions and experiences would be a manifestation of his true identity as a person.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Robert Althann's list of at least nine different people, who bore that name in the past, especially, about the same period with the prophet, the characteristic identity of the prophet as portrayed above is sustainable on the evidence of the text. Althann also notes that the meaning of the name may be derived from the last part of the name, *yahu*. He proposes three possibilities: "may yahu raise up" (*IPN*, 201), 'Yahu loosens [the womb]' (*BDB*, 941), or 'Yahu founded' (*HALAT*, 420)."<sup>9</sup>

### **The Literary Context of Jeremiah 1:5**

Irrespective of the sustainability of one or any other of the variety of structures proposed for the book of the prophet Jeremiah, this paper would not engage futilely in an extensive discussion of the structure of the entire book. That is because our focus text belongs in the very first subsection of any of the structures so far proposed by scholars, following the superscription and introduction material. This paper's conviction, therefore, that that first subdivision is an overture to the entire prophetic book also holds true for the varied structural approaches, irrespective of the arguments put forward in favor of each. More proximately, it is necessary to review the structure of the immediate contextual section within which Jer 1:5 is situated. The result of this later proposal gives direction to the rest of the paper in relation to the entire prophetic work.

Leslie Allen's work presents Jeremiah 1:1-2:3 as the larger context within which one ought to read and interpret the call of Jeremiah. Accordingly, he notes:

"The composition of 1:1-2:3 introduces Jeremiah's prophetic ministry to readers. It is made up of three units: a superscription (1:1-3), a pair of

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<sup>6</sup> Couturier, "Jeremiah," 18:4.

<sup>7</sup> Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), 407.

<sup>8</sup> See Courturier, "Jeremiah," 18:11. See also Miller, *Meet the Prophets*, 158.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Althann, "Jeremiah (Person)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 3: H-J; Eds. David Noel Freedman et al.; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:684.

accounts of Jeremiah's commissioning, the second, a later one, deliberately placed here (vv. 4-12 + 13-19), and a basic message that serves as a theological premise for all of Jeremiah's messages of disaster to Judah (2:1-3), somewhat like the motto in Amos 1:2. The clues to the literary grouping of this material are the oracle reception heading in 1:2 and the elaborating oracle reception statement in vv. 4, 11, 13, and added in MT at 2:1."<sup>10</sup>

### **Structural Divisions of 1:4-19**

A variety of structures have been proposed for the call narrative in Jer 1:4-19.

1. Division marked by the introductory oracular formula at vv. 4, 11 and 13, thus vv. 4-10, 11-12, and 13-19.
2. Chiasmic structure with "a second time" in verse 13 separating vv. 13-19 from 4-12. The two "vision oracle accounts in vv. 11-12 and 13-14 function as a double core for the passage and may be distinguished from the preceding and following messages in vv. 4-10 and 15-19" to form an ABB<sup>1</sup>A<sup>1</sup> structure."<sup>11</sup>
3. This Call of Jeremiah, as it is narrated in 1:4-19, has two visions in verses 11-16 that are sandwiched between the two dialogues with YHWH (1:4-10; and 1:17-19). In both dialogues, the personal effects of the Call of Jeremiah to prophetic ministry are unveiled, albeit, summarily. On the other hand, the visions insistently focus on the objects of the prophet's mission.

### **The Structure and the Integrity of Jer 1:4-19**

While it is quite possible to see these possible structural markers, it is important to note that it is impossible and problematic to see a unitive purpose in the division of the different sections. Yet as William Holladay insists, "vv. 4-19 must be considered as a unit," explaining that "it appears that the original stratum of the call is to be found in vv. 4-16 and that vv. 17-19, though original from Jrm, were added at a later point."<sup>12</sup>

### **Literary-Contextual Considerations**

The introduction of the call in 1:2, noting that the *word of the Lord* came to Jeremiah, "characterizes the prophet. A prophet is someone who receives the word and is controlled by the word."<sup>13</sup> Verse 3, which is a copula of this introductory title is generally considered a later addition. It has been suggested that there seems to be two headings for the book of Jeremiah. The first is in 1:1-2, while the second is 1:3. Each of these headings has a theme different from the other.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah, A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; eds. William P. Brown, *et al.*; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 21; citing Peter K. D. Neumann, "Das Wort das geschehen ist....Zum Problem der Wortempfangsterminologie in Jer. I-xxv," 181-88.

<sup>11</sup> For the presentation and critique of the varied structural divisions of Jer 1:4-19, see Allen, *Jeremiah*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25* (ed. Paul D. Hanson; Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Henry McKeating, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Epworth Commentaries; ed. Ivor H. Jones; Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, *Meet the Prophets*, 150-51, discusses the problematic of Jer 1:1-3 in greater detail.

Further specifics of the prophetic mission are found in verse 4, where it is noted that the prophet can only speak what is given to him (cf. 1 Kings 22:13-14; Numbers 22-24).<sup>15</sup> The prophet has no choice about what to say, neither does it “appear to him that he has any choice about what he says.”<sup>16</sup> More importantly, the “phrase carries with it the whole paradoxical experience of the overwhelming in-breaking of God’s revelation into the consciousness of the one who is to speak and act for God.”<sup>17</sup>

Verse 5, which is the focal text of this study, will be discussed under the exegetical section of this paper. Yet its integral connection to the binding character of prophetic call as underscored by the surrounding material must be noted.

What follows verse 5 in verses 6-9, a prophetic objection and Yahweh’s response is a characteristic component of prophetic call narratives. “I am not skilled in Speaking,” Jeremiah objects; an action that is akin to some other biblical prophetic calls, represented in the biblical tradition for the first time with Moses’ objection upon encountering God at the Burning Bush episode (Exodus 3) and the subsequent dialogue in Exod 4:10-15.

In the face of the enormous task, it is quite easy to understand Jeremiah’s other objection, “I am too young.” Despite being young, as YHWH’s prophet, he would be expected to represent YHWH before even governments and kings.<sup>18</sup> As McKane notes, “those who feel most wretched and inadequate in the presence of the divine call are, nevertheless, those who have been singled out as God’s servants and for them there is no release...It is a hard destiny and he will attract to himself hatred and violence, but Yahweh will be with him to keep him safe.”<sup>19</sup>

This expression of lowliness also speaks to God’s choice, which indiscriminately determines who receives a call without regard to status, learning and character. Yet the passage serves the function of the prophetic authenticity of the book’s leading character by “giving divine evidence of his initial appointment by God, so that readers are predisposed to trust Jeremiah’s interpretation of Judean history and to prefer him to prophets of a different stripe, who appear later in the book.”<sup>20</sup>

Verses 7-8 record the “double theme of the call” and “prophetic self-doubt” that is “answered by divine reassurance,” which “is echoed and reechoed throughout the book.”<sup>21</sup> In this meeting between God and the human agent, “natural fears are reassuringly transcended by the promise of the divine presence as a powerful factor to offset intimidating confrontation by human addressees. The one who sends Jeremiah will also be at his side.”<sup>22</sup>

Here, it must be noted that the act of YHWH sending indicates that “Yahweh is the first one responsible for what has to be said: he provides the message and instantly sustains his messenger (see Ezek 2:6-7; Deut 18:18).”<sup>23</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor underscores this point in her assertion

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<sup>15</sup> McKeating, *Jeremiah*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> McKeating, *Jeremiah*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah*.

<sup>18</sup> McKeating, *Jeremiah*, 23. See Gideon’s and Saul’s objections in Judg 6:15 and 1 Sam 9:21 respectively.

<sup>19</sup> McKane, *Jeremiah*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> McKeating, *Jeremiah*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah*, 26. Cf. Exodus 3 & 4.

<sup>23</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:13.

that God's summons to the prophet before he was born indicated "that the prophecy to follow has its origin in God, not in Jeremiah's own designs."<sup>24</sup>

Verse 9. *Touched my mouth*: The touching of the mouth in verse 9 is thus a realization of Yahweh's promise to place his words on the prophet's mouth.<sup>25</sup> The purification of Jeremiah's lips (similar to Isaiah's in Isa 6:7 and Ezekiel) is with the purpose of preparing him for his primary function as YHWH's mouthpiece. Also "the touching of Jeremiah's mouth by Yahweh indicates that Yahweh is the source of the prophetic utterance. It is a striking figure to communicate the sense that the prophet speaks authoritatively for Yahweh."<sup>26</sup> Leslie Allen reinforces that notion by underlining the effective actualization of what God uttered. "God's presence was not only promised for Jeremiah's future ministry but also manifested there and then in a striking experience, a commissioning act of sacramental symbolism...a divine touch transfers oracles to Jeremiah's mouth so that he can speak them."<sup>27</sup>

Verse 10. *To root up*: Commenting on this verse, Guy Couturier notes that: "The present assemblage of verbs in this verse "is characteristic of Jeremiah's book (18:7-10; 24:16; 31:27-28; 42:9-10; 45:4-5). The antithesis defines the two-fold aspect of the prophet's mission: To straighten what is crooked and to deepen the whole religious heritage, including occasionally new revelations."<sup>28</sup>

The use of the verbs in verse 10 marks the beginning of the authoritative mandate given to Jeremiah. Walter Brueggemann's assessment of the import of these verbs is worth reproducing here. He notes: "With the background of Sinai and its inchoate articulation of the covenant plus the traditions of Hosea and Deuteronomy, the prose of the Book of Jeremiah, situated in the most acute crisis of ancient Israel, thematizes the poetry of the prophet around judgment and hope. This is accomplished in its most vigorous articulation around the six verbs that culminate in the prophetic call narrative in Jer 1:10:

See, today I appoint you over  
nations and over kingdoms,  
to *pluck up* and to *pull down*,  
to *destroy* and to *overthrow*,  
to *build* and to *plant* (Jer 1:10 ).

Further analyzing the verbs that propel the actions consequent to the declaration, Brueggemann also notes:

The four negative verbs—pluck up, tear down, destroy, and overthrow—refer in context to the destruction of Jerusalem, the razing of the temple and the city, and the termination of the Davidic house. The two positive verbs – plant and build – refer to the restoration of the city (and the temple and perhaps the monarchy) after the destruction. It is clear in 1:4–10 that the prophet, according to this rendering, is not only to report on these two actions but is to effect these actions by performed utterance. Jeremiah, in

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<sup>24</sup> O'Connor, "Jeremiah and Exclusive Loyalty," 135.

<sup>25</sup> See also Isa 6:7; Ezekiel 2:8-3:3; and Sam 10:16, where similar rituals confirm the delivery of message to the prophet by Yahweh.

<sup>26</sup> McKane, *Jeremiah*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah*, 27. See also Isa 6:7.

<sup>28</sup> Couturier, "Jeremiah," 18:13

prophetic speech, is to do what he is to say. It is evident that the multiple uses of this set of verbs (see 12:14–17; 18:1 –11; 24:4–7; 31:27–30; 45:4) are used in a variety of ways, no doubt in different circumstances to accent different points in the framework of judgment and hope.<sup>29</sup>

There is need to skip a discussion of the two visions in verses 11-16 here and move on to verses 17ff., which are the logical sequence of verse 10. Verse 17 begins with a direct instruction—*Gird your loins*—accentuating the attitude of the prophet during his ministry. “The girding of the loins points to the promptness in the accomplishment of an order (1 Kings 18:46), as well as to the immediate preparation for battle (Job 38:3; 40:7).” Verse 18 follows up with the presentation of the prophet as *A fortified City (Steadfast Strength)*. “There is no doubt that Jeremiah is related to Moses in this call narrative, as his true successor in the delivery of the word of God.”<sup>30</sup>

Following all the reassurances from YHWH, one would expect a statement of consent from the prophet. But as Jack Lundbom pointedly noted, “Jeremiah gives no indication of accepting Yahweh’s call when it comes, despite the impression made upon him that he was chosen for prophetic office before he was born and now on the day of visitation has heard that choice confirmed (1:5, 10). But Yahweh, too, is clear that the call must await a future fulfillment: ‘I am watching over my word to perform it’ (1:12).”<sup>31</sup> The important thing here, however, is that YHWH has the last word. The rest of the narrative would show that Jeremiah consented by his words, utterances, life and actions, in binding obedience to the will and word of YHWH.

### **Verses 11-16: The Visions**

The two visions in vv. 11-16 are characterized by a poetic play on words. “Branch from an almond tree,” *šaqēd*, means Yahweh is watching over (*šōqēd*) “the fulfillment of his word.” The oracle has a threatening tone, since in Jeremiah, “the verb *šāqad* always foreshadows a calamity (5:6; 31:27-28; 44:27).”<sup>32</sup>

The object of the second vision was obscure, depending on what the interpretation is hinged on: The caldron or its support over the fire. Couturier notes that, “the meaning of the vision is clarified by another pun on the verb *nāpah*, ‘to boil’ or ‘to blow.’ As a result of the idolatrous practices of Judah, a sweeping invasion from the north will lay waste on the entire country.”<sup>33</sup>

Brueggemann’s pointed remark is worth reproducing here to underscore the importance of the literary context of the call narrative in relation to the rest of the book of Jeremiah. He notes: “it is credible to suggest that 1:4–10 is placed at the outset of the book in order to give authority (primarily) to the entire Book of Jeremiah, whatever its historical provenance may have been. In canonical form, all of the Book of Jeremiah constitutes “the words of Jeremiah” (1:1), and all of it falls under the mandate of the powerful words of 1:10.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (eds. Brent A. Strawn and Patrick D. Miller; Old Testament Theology; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 37-38. See also his *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2003), 181.

<sup>30</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:13

<sup>31</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, “Jeremiah,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:687.

<sup>32</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:14.

<sup>33</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:14.

<sup>34</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of Jeremiah*, 58-59.

In relation to our focus text, this extensive review of the surrounding material explicates the objectives of God's choice of Jeremiah from his mother's womb.

### **The Genre of Jeremiah 1:4-19**

Leslie Allen notes that: "A kaleidoscope of genres derived from Judah's cultural background adorns the passage. Special birth narratives, call traditions, vision-oracle reports, prophetic oracles of disaster and salvation, and a lament tradition have all made rich contributions and given verses 4-19 its impressive shape."<sup>35</sup>

Jer 1:4-19 is classified by McKeating as a divine call narrative, but he quickly adds that while other prophets describe such a call and we can talk of a call narrative literary classification, we must note that, "no two accounts are alike."<sup>36</sup> On a more general note, Couturier notes that: "the detailed analysis of this narrative shows a long process of redaction, the strong influence of previous call narratives (Moses, Gideon), and Israel's election."<sup>37</sup>

Authenticity of the call narrative and its prophetic origin have been discussed intensely, with views spanning from those who consider it the report of an authentic historical experience or encounter of Yahweh by the prophet through those who suggest that the prophet used an existing prophetic call genre to anchor the introduction of his prophetic work, to those who even suggest that the call narrative is an ordination formula, adopted by the prophet.<sup>38</sup> Holladay simply identifies it as a call narrative despite the complexities arising from the fact "that the various prophetic call narratives in the OT differ from each other in their constitutive elements."<sup>39</sup>

All of the above components, both the particularities and the general alignment with previous prophetic call narratives, give Jeremiah's call its definitive character. And it is primarily in the light of the prophetic understanding of the call's definitive character then do we begin to appreciate the struggles of the prophet later in the book. Accordingly, Couturier notes:

Furthermore, if we can compare Jeremiah's call with those of Isaiah (6:1-13) and Ezekiel (23:3-15), we are struck by three distinctive notes, the predestination of a prophet to his office is clearly underlined: Yahweh's plan for such a man originated from the first moment of his existence (cf. Judg 13:5; Isa 49:1-2; Luke 1:15; Gal 1:15-16). Second, this dialogue shows how intimate are the relations between Yahweh and his prophets; several other languages involved show that this intimacy never stopped growing. Jeremiah is the sole prophet that revealed to us the inner struggle that such a mission caused him.

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<sup>35</sup> He adds that: "Such a bombardment of genres presents Jeremiah as an accredited prophet for the coming crisis, empowered to be Yahweh's plenipotentiary, despite the controversy he was to stir up among his contemporaries." Allen, *Jeremiah*, 32-33. See also, Brueggemann, *Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 33-34.

<sup>36</sup> McKeating, *Jeremiah*, 22. See also the rather dramatic presentation of Jeremiah's experience by Mordecai Schreiber, *The Man Who Knew God* (New York: Lexington Books, 2010), 5-18.

<sup>37</sup> Couturier, "Jeremiah," 18:12; citing B. Renaud, "Jér 1: Structure et théologie, "le livre de Jérémie, 177-96.

<sup>38</sup> For details of these discussions and the evaluation of the different positions, see McKane, *Jeremiah*, 11-14.

<sup>39</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 26-27. He also notes the particular similarity of the Jeremiah call narrative to Moses' in Exodus 3:1-4:17, esp. 3:10-12 and the call of Gideon in Judg 6:11-23, esp. vv. 11-17.

Finally, the inherent persecution following this mission is strongly stressed. The entire book is crisscrossed with such dark events.<sup>40</sup>

This brief discussion on genre firmly establishes Jer 1:4-19 within the context of and in relation to an existing biblical genre, Biblical Prophetic Call Narratives, albeit, a multifaceted genre. It also sends signals on the affirmation of Jeremiah as one who is sent in the context of the ancient sender-messenger tradition. For as Brueggemann asserts: “Characteristically, the prophet is a human person dispatched to earth by the gods with messages about divine governance – thus the ‘messenger formula’: ‘thus saith the Lord.’ This formula, recurrent in Jeremiah, attests that prophetic utterance is not the personal word of the prophet but is a divine message from a ‘higher authority’.”<sup>41</sup> This observation also confirms the call narrative in Jeremiah within the context of the sender-messenger tradition, whereby the messenger who is perceived to have been imbued with all the authority of the sender must be received and treated as if he were the sender himself. Anything to the contrary was considered an affront to the personal integrity and dignity of the sender and his office.

### The Analysis of Jeremiah 1:5

William Holladay’s overall assessment of the poetic structure of the verse and his observations present some interesting insights even if the meaning of the text is not impacted significantly by his impute. He notes:

The speech of Yahweh’s in v 5 is carefully balanced. Now all translations and commentaries that take the division into cola seriously divide it into three cola. But the question arises whether it should not rather be construed in five cola. Two considerations lead to this conclusion: (1) The ‘before’-clause [introduced by *bêterem*] in Isa 42:9b seems to form a colon of its own, and the diction of that verse is very close to those here; cf. further Jer 13:16. (2) The prepositional expressions “in the belly,” “from the womb,” and “to the nations” appear to be parallel; each is followed by a verb expressing Yahweh’s appointment of Jeremiah. These two considerations lead to our understanding the first two independent clauses to be ‘in the belly I knew you’ and “from the womb I dedicated you” rather than simply the bare verbs “I knew you” and “I dedicated you.” The difference from the conventional understanding is not great, but it is nice nevertheless: the prepositional phrases are not buried in their clauses, but highlighted.<sup>42</sup>

The argument above is further underscored by the observation that the nouns “belly” *beten* and “womb” *rehem* are “often in parallelism (Isa 46:3; Pss 22:11; 58:4; Job 3:11; 10:18-19; 31:35).”<sup>43</sup> In addition, the three main verbs are all parallel. “I knew you” *yadaetika*, “I designated you” *hiqdashtika*, and “I made you” *netatika*.

The following operating phrases in the verse, guided by the two introductory uses of “before,” hold the key to the interpretation of the verse. The repetition of “before” in the verse is quite

<sup>40</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:13.

<sup>41</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of Jeremiah*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25* (ed. Paul D. Hanson; Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 25-26.

<sup>43</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, 33.



striking and is said to occur frequently in the “contexts of birth or creation or death (compare Isa 42:9; 48:5; 66:7; Pss 39:14; 90:2).”<sup>44</sup>

The prophet was born for the task as his designation as a prophet was predetermined from birth. “His call took place long ago, before the prophet even knew about it” (cf. Isa 49:1 on the suffering servant’s predetermined vocation).<sup>45</sup> Beyond the note that the “unborn are formed by the word of God and given life by him as full human beings even in the womb,” the early church fathers noted that divine intentionality was behind both actions.<sup>46</sup>

“I formed you” (*yāšar*) is used here with the sense of the modeling of Pottery. It has the technical meaning of create – even though Yahweh is often portrayed as Potter (Gen 2:7-8). Its other uses in Amos 4:13; Jer. 51:9; Isa 45:18; 49:5; Psalm 95:5 shed light on its meaning in this context.<sup>47</sup>

“In the womb”: God himself forms the young child in the womb; the significance is that God knows the human person and stands as a unique master from the very first moment of a person’s existence (Job 10:8-12; Ps.22: 10-11; 71:6; 139:13ff).<sup>48</sup> Once so identified, the prophet speaks God’s word and heeds Yahweh’s bidding.

“I knew you” (*yāda’*): Not just intellectual knowledge but also “an action of the will and sensibility.”<sup>49</sup> Such knowledge is often the basis for communion between the creature and the creator; the prophet and YHWH.

“I dedicated you” *qādaš*. To sanctify or to consecrate here connotes the separation of something or someone for divine sacrifice. Hence all the verbs in 1:5 designate YHWH’s action in relation to Jeremiah’s mission. Thus “Jeremiah is set aside by God for his prophetic mission,”<sup>50</sup> a mission to the nations.

### **“I appointed you a prophet to the nations”**

Such an appointment is a consequent confirmation of what God has predetermined from the very beginning. Jeremiah’s appointment has no specific scale or scope attached; it is an enormous job that goes beyond his immediate domestic purview.<sup>51</sup>

Allen again captures the comprehensive nature of this divine project in his observation that: “Jeremiah’s call is strikingly presented as the culmination of long-term divine planning that antedated his conception and birth.”<sup>52</sup> He also adds that the information in verse 5 would be characteristic of other biblical texts where we have the announcements of the births of important

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<sup>44</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, 33.

<sup>45</sup> McKeating, *Jeremiah*, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Note: Qere “I formed you” *’etzareka* versus ketib “I summoned you” *’atzureka*. Note also the prefigurative interpretation of the text, as it was seen as looking ahead to either John the Baptist or Jesus by the church Fathers. Augustine, *On Eighty-Three Varied Questions*, 68.6; Theodoret of Cyrillus, *On Jeremiah*, I.1.4-6; Jerome, *Six Books of Jeremiah* 1.2.1-3; cited in *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Ancients Christian Commentary on Scripture; Old Testament XII; ed. Dean O. Wenhe; Gen Ed. Thomas C. Oden; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 1-5.

<sup>47</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:13.

<sup>48</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:13.

<sup>49</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:13.

<sup>50</sup> Couturier, “Jeremiah,” 18:13.

<sup>51</sup> O’Connor, “Jeremiah and Exclusive Loyalty,” 132-34.

<sup>52</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah*, 25.

characters to either parents or those concerned (on Samuel to Hannah [1 Sam 1:11], Samson [Judg 13:3-5], Isaac [Gen 17:19]). In the case of Jeremiah, however, “Long ago a divine decision had been made, to set Jeremiah aside to belong to God and to be used by God.... The precise sacred purpose is stated in an abrupt and blatant climax. The divine plan was for Jeremiah to be a “prophet for nations,” and he had already been designated for this task.”<sup>53</sup>

Nations, the object of his mission, would include not just Israel and Judah but all the nations in view in the oracles in chapters 46-51, earlier introduced in chapter 25. Suffice it to note, as William McKane observes, that *goyim* as it is used in 1:5 includes Judah, “Israel as well as the Gentiles world.”<sup>54</sup>

## **Theological Abstraction**

### **Call, Vocation and the Life of a Prophet**

The reading of Jer 1:5 in the light of the grammatical analysis above presents the call, vocation and life of the prophet as one integral divine project to which the object must apply himself or herself in every regard. This union of vocation and life ensures the ordering of events in the ministry of the prophet. Although the unitary nature of these events relate to moments in the life of the prophet, the prophet himself does come to the point in his life where the integral wholeness of his very life is laid bare to him as a divine project. Such awareness affords him the *raison d'être* for his words and actions, especially in difficult moments. If this is an acceptable interpretation of the prophet Jeremiah's life and times, theological abstractions can be made that apply to the discussion on vows and religious life, since vows would correctly be viewed as religious response to God's call. The validity of such a theological abstraction becomes more obvious when one itemizes some of the important paradigms of religious response that can be gleaned from the life and works of the prophet Jeremiah.

### **Paradigms of Religious Response in Jeremiah**

- a. Without playing to the gallery, Jeremiah followed closely the dictates of the one who called him.
- b. So called and commissioned, the prophet remained staunch and yet sensitive to the objects and goals of his mission with a very pastoral outlook.
- c. The prophetic awareness of his call as a covenantal bond with YHWH, truly representative of the character of divine election in the biblical tradition, is projected in the confidence with which he executed his mandate and gave his a true sense of communion with the one who chose, sanctified and called him. Communion is usually the ultimate purpose of divine election.
- d. In response to his call, the prophet stayed with the message in good times and in bad. That is the very essence of witness as he represented YHWH's interest to the people through thick and thin, faithfully proclaiming the word entrusted to him without compromise, just as the Lord has commanded.
- e. As the proclamation of that word drew very vicious and violent reactions from the people and Israel's socio-political, economic and priestly leaders, the prophet remained resilient in the opposition and oppression that resulted from his mandate.

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<sup>53</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah*, 25-26.

<sup>54</sup> William McKane, F.B.A., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah I-XXV* (vol. 1; Eds. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield; The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1986), 6. See also Brueggemann, *Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 110-15, 130-33, 154.

- f. The prophet was always conscious that he was the vehicle and instrument of the One who called and reassured him of his protection and guidance. So the prophet lived under the shadow of such a reassurance and drew strength from his abiding companionship with YHWH as he faced violence and opposition.
- g. Such struggles result in his classification as a man of strife and contention, a prophet whose conviction was conveyed in the performance of his utterances on various occasions; preaching as it were by his very life and actions (dramatizing the message entrusted to him).
- h. Jeremiah's awareness that his life was totally at the disposal of YHWH led to a wholesome response to his vocation throughout his ministry. His celibate life was part of such a wholesome response to YHWH's bidding (16:1-2): a visible sign of the commitment of the prophet's entire life to YHWH's Service.<sup>55</sup>

The prophet, called and chosen, is the instrument through whom God engages the particular situations in view, having been given YHWH's word that must be conveyed accurately to those concerned.<sup>56</sup> The God, who has chosen and called the prophet, mediates His own word, encounter and activities through the very words, encounters and life of the prophet. The call narrative itself underscores the prophetic authority of Jeremiah, called by YHWH, appointed and commissioned to proclaim God's word. As Walter Brueggemann incisively points out, "It is clear in this scenario that Jeremiah is the recipient of divine address, is compelled to prophetic performance, and in fact is given no option."<sup>57</sup>

### **Implication for Priestly and Religious Life in Nigeria**

Priests and consecrated men and women are called by God as Jeremiah was.<sup>58</sup> And the awareness of the challenging unfolding of God's plan at distinct moments in their response must not blind them from the wholesome divine project that each authentic vocation is. Such a response to God's call is necessarily tied to the history and experiences of his time and can only be actualized within that context. So every individual vocation is a response to God's call just as Jeremiah's was, but with a full realization that that call happens within the framework of a gracious divine plan that started unfolding even before one's awareness and birth. As such each authentic vocation is initiated by God, animated by God, and actualized by God. And the response that flows there from is human cooperation with God's action.

Through their vows, the ones consecrated (sanctified) by God are in-turn consecrated (set apart) for God, by vowing commitment to a covenantal relationship marked by chastity, poverty and obedience,<sup>59</sup> or other forms, as the case may be.

Awareness of God's role as the initiator and the one who watches over the unfolding of a vocation by the recipient of the gift of vocation enhances self-confidence and reassurance. It also acts as a check in the exercise of power, authority, ministry, and service.

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<sup>55</sup> Branick, *Understanding the Prophets*, 143.

<sup>56</sup> See Brueggemann, *Theology of Jeremiah*, 57-66, for a detailed discussion of this relationship between the prophet and YHWH.

<sup>57</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology of Jeremiah*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Vatican II Decree on the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, Oct. 08, 1965, #1.

<sup>59</sup> See the Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns, *Venite Seorsum*, Aug. 15, 1969, in *Vatican Council II: Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Gen. ed. Austin Flannery, Bandra, Mumbai: St. Paul's Publication, 2004), 582-99.

## Conclusion

Brueggemann's summary of the relation between the word of the Lord and the word of the prophet is instructive to today's consecrated ones as they engage the text on a daily basis for the purpose of ministry. He notes: "The interplay of human speech and divine word requires a faithful attentiveness matched by human critical awareness, both of which are indispensable for receiving what is given in the text as new truth."<sup>60</sup> Such a "faithful attentiveness" would necessarily include the daily commitment to living out one's vows, while a "critical awareness" of contemporary challenges to such an endeavor strengthens the resolve of the consecrated.

In both efforts, some aspects of the call of Jeremiah are instructive for the way forward. First, consecrated men and women need to be constantly mindful of the fact that their vocation is God's choice, just like Jeremiah's. God is the one who determines absolutely who receives a call, without regard to status, learning and stature. The awareness of the source of one's vocation strengthens the effort of the one called to respond wholeheartedly by faithfully fulfilling the demands of the obligations of his/her vocation, as a faithful witness like Jeremiah and in imitation of Jesus, the one who calls us to discipleship and the Lord of the community of disciples.

Second, consecrated men and women need to be constantly mindful of their consecration just like Jeremiah. In the call narrative, the purpose of Jeremiah's consecration was intimately tied to the pronouncement of his consecration. He was set apart for a purpose that demanded both service and sacrifice; set apart as the bearer of a message that must be communicated as given, irrespective of the challenges faced by the messengers. So like Jeremiah, the consecration of the religious in our time is definitely intimately bound to a concrete mission that must be carried out through committed service that demands sacrifice. That mission is first and foremost visibly exercised through an active and free commitment to the celebration and keeping of the religious vows and commitments.

Last but not the least, the words of Jesus must ring true in the ears and hearts of all consecrated persons: "you did not choose me, no, I chose you and commissioned you to go and bear fruit..." (John 15:16). In a sense "we are not our own." As bearers of a divine message and mandate therefore, consecrated persons must consciously seek God's will in the unfolding of their vocations and their response to God's call. Functioning outside the plan of the one who called and chose is an aberration and often leads to a dysfunctional response and crisis. Celebrating that call, choice and election provides the nourishment and inspiration needed for the journey as consecrated persons respond daily to God's call in the midst of life's challenges and the demands of their mission.

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<sup>60</sup> Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 401.