

THE CALL OF JEREMIAH

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For every true believer, the concept of a divine call should be absolutely basic to his understanding of biblical religion. The call of Abram (Gen 12:1-3) at the very beginning of the patriarchal history is the seminal event referred to by Stephen at the very beginning of his speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7. Adherents of all other religions are asked to reach out to God, but the Bible everywhere describes God as reaching out to us, searching for us, calling us. Elsewhere the direction of the call is from down upward, as people seek to touch God in their own strength and through their own devices, building towers of Babel in uninvited attempts to storm the bastions of heaven. But in Scripture the direction of the call is from above downward, and that difference alone is enough to expose every man-made religion as being diametrically opposed to biblical faith. F. Thompson has depicted God figuratively as "The Hound of Heaven," pursuing us relentlessly" down the nights and down the days," "down the arches of the years" of our lives.¹ Indeed, as the hymnwriter puts it,

Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult
Of our life's wild, restless sea,
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth,
Saying, "Christian, follow Me."²

It hardly needs to be stressed that the imperatives of the divine call to any life do not take place in an historical vacuum, and supremely is this the case when God calls a spokesman to perform a special task.

¹ F. Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1922) 45.

² C. F. Alexander, "Jesus Calls Us," *Worship and Service Hymnal* (Chicago: Hope, 1966) 407.

The call of each OT prophet or deliverer, for example, occurred in a particular historical context that was usually precipitated by a national crisis of some sort. For Moses it was the Egyptian crisis, for Gideon it was the Midianite crisis, and for Jeremiah it was the sickness unto death that was destined to bring the southern kingdom of Judah to her final end.

The history of any nation furnishes examples of both good and bad rulers. Although most of Judah's kings were wicked men to a greater or lesser degree, a few of them tried to be faithful to the God whose law their priests had been trained to teach and on whose behalf their prophets spoke. One such good ruler was Hezekiah. By governing his people for the most part wisely and well, he slowed down the decay and disintegration of the kingdom. But much of Hezekiah's work of spiritual renewal came to naught at his death, because he was succeeded by his reprobate son Manasseh--the most evil king ever to occupy the throne of Judah.

The old saying, "Like father, like son," was not applicable to Manasseh. He almost completely undid the religious reformation that had been carried out under his father's direction. He built altars to Baal, made altars for the worship of the starry hosts within the two courts of the temple, and sacrificed one of his sons as an offering to false gods. Although prophets warned him that he would be punished for his terrible sins, he paid no attention to them and continued to shed innocent blood throughout Jerusalem. In his later years he repented somewhat, but it was too little and too late: the seeds of evil worship and idolatry that he had sown would remain to plague Judah up to the time of the Babylonian exile.

I. Historical Context of Jeremiah's Call (Jer 1:1-3)

About ten years before Manasseh's death, an important and fateful event occurred in the land of Judah. There was nothing particularly spectacular about it, and no one at the time could have recognized its profound significance for the nation as a whole. The event was the birth of a male child in the house of Hilkiyah, one of the priests of Anathoth, a little town located slightly more than an hour's walk north-east of Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin.³ The boy was fore-

³ The modern village of Anata preserves the ancient name of the site, while Iron Age remains at Ras el-Kharrubeh ("Summit of the Carob Beans"), two-thirds of a mile southwest of Anata, make identification of Ras el-Kharrubeh with the Biblical Anathoth virtually certain; cf. *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land* (rev. ed.; ed. A. Negev; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986) 28; W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah I* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 16.

ordained by God to become one of the two greatest prophets of Israel under the Old Covenant, but of course at the time his father knew nothing of that. He decided to give his son the relatively common and lackluster name of Jeremiah.⁴

The early years of Jeremiah's life were crucial ones for Judah, politically speaking. Manasseh died in due course, and when after only two years of rule, Amon, Manasseh's son and successor, was murdered by palace servants, the assassination must have left its mark on the impressionable mind of the young Jeremiah.

With the accession of good King Josiah, however, the boy lived out the rest of his teenage years in a fair degree of peace and serenity.

But

A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts--⁵

and I cannot help wondering whether Jeremiah was entirely pleased with the religious situation as he found it in his hometown. After all, his father was a priest of the Lord, which made Jeremiah a "PK," a "priest's kid," the OT equivalent of the modern-day "preacher's kid." Jeremiah turned out so well in later life that his father must have been the kind of man in whose vocabulary the word "discipline" loomed large. Hilkiah doubtless taught his son the Ten Commandments, and to love the Lord his God with all of his heart and mind and soul and strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, and not to walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. The stern and dignified and unyielding character of Jeremiah's later life assures us, from the human standpoint at the very least, that his father had learned the secret of disciplining him in love. Fond memories of those early years in his home must have strengthened Jeremiah and given him solace and comfort as he went about the difficult task that God commissioned him to perform.

And what was that task? Jeremiah was to be a spokesman for his God. Indeed, the divine call to prophesy may well have come to him while he was viewing the bleak landscape and the rocky terrain surrounding Anathoth on one of the frequent hikes that are part and parcel of any youth's routine. Every time he heard or even thought about the name of his hometown Jeremiah must have shuddered inwardly, because Anathoth is the plural of Anath, the name of the infamous West

⁴ At least seven different OT men (cf. BDB 941), and perhaps as many as ten (cf. B. T. Dahlberg, *IDB* 822), bore the name.

⁵ H. W. Longfellow, "My Lost Youth," *American Poetry and Prose* (3d ed.; ed. N. Foerster; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947) 756-57.

Semitic goddess well known from Canaanite poetry of an earlier period as the sister of Baal and ironically referred to in that poetry as "the virgin."⁶ A parallel development is that of the city-name Ashtaroth, the plural of the name of the equally infamous Babylonian goddess Ishtar, known also as the "Queen of Heaven" (Jer 7:18; 44:17-19, 25). In the ancient Near East, cities were often named for a tutelary god or goddess, and such considerations caused Jeremiah, early in his ministry, to taunt Judah by saying, "Where then are the gods you made for yourselves? Let them come if they can save you when you are in trouble! For you have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah" (Jer 2:28), and again: "You have as many gods as you have towns, O Judah; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem" (11:13).

As a young man, Jeremiah had already seen many of the evil results of pagan worship, and he perhaps longed to do something--anything--to foster and further the worship of the God of his fathers. But we can be sure that he had no idea of the fearful responsibility that the Lord was about to place on his shoulders.

The date of Jeremiah's call coincided with the "thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah" (1:2), which was 627 or 626 B.C.⁷ That, says Jeremiah, was when "the word of the LORD came" to him (1:2, 4; 25:3). He later wrote that the Lord "began speaking to (him) in the reign of Josiah" (36:2), and he dated an early divine oracle to him as occurring "during the reign of King Josiah" (3:6). The year 626 B.C. would indeed have initiated a time of crisis for Judah, for in that year Nabopolassar became the ruler of Babylonia. He soon began an ambitious and aggressive program of expansion that, under him and his son Nebuchadnezzar II, would lead not only to the devastation of Nineveh in 612, the obliteration of Assyria in 609, and the humbling of Egypt in 605, but also to the invasion and eventual destruction of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, together with the razing of its temple and the death and/or exile of its people, primarily in 597 and 586 B.C. The latter year, the "eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah," also marked the formal end of Jeremiah's prophesying in Jerusalem (1:3), giving him a total ministry of about 40 years in that city.

⁶ Cf., J. C. de Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit* (Leiden: Brill, 1987) 7 n. 33; 114.

⁷ Although 627/626 B.C. as the date of Jeremiah's call is preferred by most commentators (cf., e.g., H. H. Rowley, "The Early Prophecies of Jeremiah in Their Setting," *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies* [ed. L. G. Perdue and B. W. Kovacs; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984] 33-37), others prefer much later dates (for a brief survey see L. G. Perdue, "Jeremiah in Modern Research: Approaches and Issues," *A Prophet to the Nations 2-4*; cf. also J. P. Hyatt, "The Beginning of Jeremiah's Prophecy," and C. F. Whitley, "The Date of Jeremiah's Call," *A Prophet to the Nations 63-87*; Holladay, *Jeremiah I* 1-2).

II. Literary Context of Jeremiah's Call

A comparison of the literary structure of the account of Jeremiah's call with those of the accounts of the calls of Moses and Gideon reveals that Jeremiah made extensive use of an outline that demonstrates his firm conviction that Moses and Gideon, men of calling akin to his, were his spiritual ancestors.⁸

	<i>Moses</i>	<i>Gideon</i>	<i>Jeremiah</i>
1. Divine confrontation	Exod 3:1-4a	Judg 6:11-12a	Jer 1:4
2. Introductory word	3:4b-9	6:12b-13	1:5a
3. Commission	3:10	6:14	1:5b
4. Objection	3:11	6:15	1:6
5. Reassurance	3:12a	6:16	1:7-9

It goes without saying that similarity of literary genre in no way denies the actuality of the event described, its reality in space and time.⁹

III. Contents of Jeremiah's Call (Jer 1:5)

I like to think that, like his earlier kinsman Moses, Jeremiah received his commission and made his commitment in a quiet retreat, far from the hustle and bustle of the city. With Moses it was on "the far side of the desert," near the burning bush, at Mount Sinai. Perhaps with Jeremiah it was in a similar place. As far as we know, the appearance of God to Jeremiah was not nearly so spectacular as it had been to Moses; there was no burning bush or other startling visible phenomenon. But although Jeremiah did not see or feel anything, at least not at first, he heard the voice of the Lord speaking to him (1:4). While it is evident from Scripture that people hear God when he speaks, and while it is demonstrable that sometimes his voice is a sound audible to the human ear (cf. 1 Sam 3:4-14),¹⁰ whether a word from God comes to us externally or internally is usually of little consequence. Reception of divine communication by means of an inward ear makes that communication no less real. In any case we have no sure way of knowing exactly how the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.

Following the description of the divine confrontation (Jer 1:4), which is elegant in its simplicity, the introductory word and its

⁸ Cf. N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965) 297-309; Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1 27. My comparison, although owing much to those of Habel and Holladay, differs slightly from theirs.

⁹ Habel, "Form and Significance" 305,317.

¹⁰ For the possibility that the "prophetic call" of Samuel was in reality an "auditory message dream theophany" see R. K. Gnuse, *The Dream Theophany of Samuel* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984).

attendant commission summarize the various elements of Jeremiah's call. Four verbs are employed, all of which have "I" (= God) as their subject and the suffixal "you" (= Jeremiah) as their object.

1. *Creation*. God says that he "formed" Jeremiah in the womb. The verb "form" is regularly used to describe the work of a craftsman, especially of a potter (cf. 18:1-6), and Gen 2:1 comes immediately to mind: "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Creation by God was an element in the call of Jeremiah, who was thereby "predestined to the prophetic office even before he was born."¹¹ In a sense, therefore, the verb "formed" is presupposed by the other three verbs and serves as the indispensable pedestal on which they stand. Though written for another purpose, the famous words of Augustine are appropriate here: "You, a Lord, have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

2. *Choice*. God says that he "knew" Jeremiah. More a reference to knowledge by experience (cf. Gen 4:1 MT) than to knowledge by mere acquaintance--that is, more a reference to heart knowledge than to head knowledge--the verb implies that God "knew" Jeremiah, personally and individually and intimately, even before Jeremiah was formed in the womb. Such knowledge is virtually the equivalent of election or choice, and it carries with it elements of redemption¹² as well (cf. Gen 18:19 MT; Amos 3:2 MT). The verb "know" was also a key ingredient in covenant terminology in the ancient Near East:¹³ The suzerain was to "know" his vassal, and vice versa. Israel's knowing God was therefore the expected joyful and loving response to his knowing them, and this in turn had significant ramifications in the areas of social justice (Jer 22:16), mutual understanding between God and his people (Exod 33:12-13), and the like. It is thus ironic that Jeremiah's instinctive and immature response to God's knowledge of him was that he did not "know" how to speak (Jer 1:6).

3. *Consecration*. God says that he "set" Jeremiah "apart." The underlying Hebrew root is usually translated "holy," as in Jer 2:3, where Israel is depicted as "holy to the LORD" when she was in the bloom of youth, early in her history. OT call narratives often use the word "holy": Moses was told to remove his sandals because the place

¹¹ J. Bright, "A Prophet's Lament and Its Answer: Jeremiah 15:10-21," *A Prophet to the Nations* 329.

¹² Habel, "Form and Significance" 307.

¹³ H. B. Huffmon, "The Treaty Background of Hebrew יָדָע ," *BASOR* 181 (February 1966) 31-37.

where he was standing was "holy ground" (Exod 3:5), and Isaiah heard seraphs calling to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty" (Isa 6:3). To approach God's presence, or to serve him, one must be made holy, be consecrated, be set apart or sanctified by God (Exod 19:14). Jeremiah was set apart in order that he might be able to prophesy to people who, though once holy, were no longer so.

4. *Commission.* God says that he "appointed" Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations. The underlying Hebrew root is usually translated "gave"; the meaning "appointed" is a nuance subsumed under the derived sense of "put" or "placed." In Jeremiah's case, choice and consecration were followed by commission, a special commission as a prophet to the nations (cf. chaps. 25; 46-51). Far from being restricted to merely provincial interests, Jeremiah's prophetic mission was to be worldwide (in the context of his time). Such a divine appointment could not but be expected to produce a reluctant response--indeed, a negative response--from Jeremiah.

IV. Jeremiah's Objection to His Call (Jer 1:6)

Even had Jeremiah been anxious to do his part, was not God asking a bit too much of him? How could he possibly be a prophet to the nations? What academic credentials could he produce that would qualify him for such a high position? What fame did he possess that would command the attention and respect of the nations? His objections--excuses, really--were two in number.

1. *Timidity.* "I do not know how to speak." Moses at the burning bush had also given his lack of eloquence, his inability to articulate his thoughts with precision, as a reason that he hoped would be enough to release him from the responsibility of leading his people out of bondage in Egypt (Exod 4:10). The comparison between Jeremiah and Moses in this regard is at least as old as the 4th century A.D., when Ambrose of Milan wrote: "Moses and Jeremiah were called by the Lord to preach God's oracles to the people, as he enabled them by grace to do, but they pled timidity as an excuse."¹⁴ And, in a sense, who can blame them? How could it be otherwise? Who is sufficient for such things?

2. *Youth.* "I am only a child." Jeremiah may have been in his late teenage years, or in his early twenties at best, when God called him. Since wisdom came with experience and age in the ancient world, how

¹⁴ Quoted in W. L. Holladay, "The Background of Jeremiah's Self-Understanding. Moses, Samuel, and Psalm 22," *A Prophet to the Nations* 314.

could God expect Jeremiah, young as he was, to accept such a daunting task? Centuries later, how could Paul expect the young Timothy to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in apurity" (1 Tim 4:12)? Can one really suppose that a mere child will "flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim 2:22)? Jeremiah would some day learn not to trust in or boast of wisdom, or strength, or riches, but rather to boast about his understanding and knowledge of God and his will (Jer 9:23-24). But for now his response was characterized by the timid reluctance that is an all-too-common accompaniment of youthful immaturity.

V. Divine Reassurance to Jeremiah (Jer 1:7-9)

The Lord's words of reassurance to Jeremiah not only repeat in essence the content of the divine commission¹⁵ but also respond to his twofold objection. The section 1:7-9 is paralleled in some respects by the three verses that conclude the chapter (vv 17-19), and 1:7, 9 echo Deut 18:18 in such a remarkable way that they assuredly reflect Jeremiah's consciousness of being a prophet like Moses.¹⁶ Each verse of reassurance may be treated in turn as a distinct unit.

1. *Divine authority.* To Jeremiah's objection that he is "only a child" the Lord responds that he will give him the courage to go to everyone he is sent to, and to Jeremiah's objection that he does not "know how to speak" the Lord responds that he will give him the ability to say whatever he is commanded to (1:7). The phrase "say whatever I command" (cf. also 1:17) is a reflex not only of Deut 18:18¹⁷ but also of Exod 7:2,¹⁸ another classic text concerning Moses as a spokesman called by God.

2. *Divine presence.* To Jeremiah's timidity the Lord responds with the command not to fear as well as with the most comforting of all promises: "I am with you" (1:8). The latter phrase is repeated in 1:19, a phenomenon evident also in the call of Gideon (Judg 6:12, 16) and in a profoundly important theological context, the account of the call of Moses (Exod 3:12, 14 MT), where it is linked to the most intimate form of the divine name, "I AM WHO I AM" (cf. also Judg 6:16 MT).¹⁹ God as the great "I AM" does not intend by that name to teach us about his

¹⁵ Habel, "Form and Significance" 301.

¹⁶ J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 148.

¹⁷ Habel, "Form and Significance" 308.

¹⁸ Holladay, "Background" 315.

¹⁹ Habel, "Form and Significance" 319.

ontological existence but rather to assure us of his gracious and protecting and permanent presence. As Immanuel, "God With Us," he guarantees that he will never leave us or forsake us. Central in the three sentences of divine reassurance, the Immanuel theme is also a central feature--some would say the most central and noteworthy feature--of Scripture as a whole. For example, Matthew begins his gospel by presenting Jesus Christ as "God with us" (Matt 1:23) and concludes it by recording Jesus' words: "I am with you always" (28:20). The Bible itself begins with God creating humankind for fellowship with him (Gen 1:27; 2:7; 3:8) and concludes with John's prayer: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people" (Rev 22:21). Small wonder that John Wesley on his deathbed uttered in a clear, loud voice--more than once--these words that became a watchword of Methodism: "The best of all is, God is with us!"²⁰

3. *Divine touch.* In a way analogous to the seraph's touching the sinful lips of Isaiah (Isa 6:6-7), the Lord responds to Jeremiah's professed lack of speaking ability by symbolically touching his mouth (Jer 1:9). The word "pat" is literally "given," found elsewhere only in Deut 18:18 and Jer 5:14 ("make") in the sense of "placing" words in someone's mouth.²¹ As God had "given" Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations (1:5), so now he has "given" Jeremiah his own words in order to help him fulfill more adequately his divinely ordained mission.

VI. Conclusion

Jeremiah was appointed to be a "prophet" to the nations. The English word "prophet" is a somewhat inadequate translation of the Hebrew word **נָבִי**, the passive participle of a verb best clarified in its occurrences in Akkadian. There the verb *nabu* means "to call," and in the prologue to his law code the Babylonian king Hammurapi referred to himself as *nibit Enlil*, "one called by the god Enlil."²² Similarly, a "prophet" of the Lord is "one called" by God to serve as a deputy, a representative, an ambassador²³ from the court of heaven--"one called" by God to be a spokesman for God. He is a person who proclaims the words that God tells him (Jer 19:2). The prophet, as one who has been called, is a man of vocation.

How can we apply to our own lives and experiences this understanding of the role of the ancient Israelite prophet? We can learn to

²⁰ C. T. Winchester, *The Life of John Wesley* (London: Macmillan, 1906) 263.

²¹ Holladay, "Background" 315.

²² Cf. CAD 11/2203 for additional examples.

²³ Habel, "Form and Significance" 312, 318, 323.

pity the man in the ministry today for whom that ministry is a profession rather than a vocation. We can learn to pity the self-made minister. It is only God who can "give," who can "make," who can "appoint" a minister. The initiative in making a prophet rests with God, and it is only the false prophet who arrogates that title to himself. The ministry is a vocation, a calling; it is not a profession, something that a man himself chooses as he would a book from a shelf or a frozen dinner from a supermarket display case.

Miserable indeed must be the man who, without receiving a definite call from God, has willfully plunged ahead into the ministry anyhow! I am convinced that the weakness and spiritual lethargy that characterizes far too many churches in these days is due at least partially to the fact that their pulpits are occupied by uncalled men; men who have usurped the divine prerogative and have placed themselves in positions that they have no right to hold. In such cases the voice of authority is replaced by the voice of opinion; proclamation is replaced by discussion; the Word of God is replaced by the words of men.

But miserable indeed must also be the man who, having received a definite call from God, has refused to obey that call! Jeremiah tried to keep from speaking forth God's word at one point in his career, but he was unable to keep it in because it was like a fire shut up in his bones (Jer 20:9). Peter and John on one occasion said, "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). And Paul referred to the inward compulsion that he felt: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). So it always is with the true prophet: He becomes miserable when for one reason or other he is not engaged in fulfilling his divine vocation.

I feel confident, however, in affirming that there is no happier man on the face of the earth than the man who, having been called by God to be a spokesman for God, has been obedient to the heavenly vision and has answered the call with a resounding "Here am I. Send me!" (Isa 6:8). Such a man was the prophet Jeremiah; such was the legacy that had come down to him. He had been created, chosen, consecrated, and commissioned by the Lord himself. His objections had been more than answered by a gracious God. And he would soon learn that the best of all is this: The Lord would be with him.

Hallelujah! what a Saviour!
 Hallelujah! what a Friend!
 Saving, helping, keeping, loving,
 He is with me to the end.²⁴

²⁴ J. W. Chapman, "Our Great Saviour," *Worship and Service Hymnal*, no. 121.

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