

Jeremiah's Call and Commission

(Jer 1:4–12, 13–19; 15:16–17)

THE PROPHET OF ANATHOTH

JEREMIAH WAS A YOUNG boy, perhaps 12 or 13, when a revelation came to him from Yahweh God. It happened at Anathoth, a small village three miles north of Jerusalem where he lived. Anathoth was populated by priests and their families since at least the time of Solomon, when Solomon banished Abiathar there following the latter's support of another successor to David's kingship (1 Kgs 2:26–27). Anathoth may have been a priestly village earlier. Jeremiah's father was Hilkiah, most likely not the high priest Hilkiah who found the law-book in the Jerusalem Temple during the reform of King Josiah, but rather a lesser known priest of the same name living in Anathoth. Some have suggested that the two individuals were one and the same, but that seems unlikely. We don't know, of course.

JEREMIAH'S CALL TO BE A PROPHET

THE REVELATION TO JEREMIAH came in the 13th year of Josiah (1:1–2). In it Yahweh informed the young Jeremiah that he had been called to be a prophet to the nations. Not just to Judah, but to the nations of the world. Yahweh, after all, was God of all nations, not just Judah. Jeremiah would be an international figure like Elijah and Elisha, also others before

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and after who spoke Yahweh's word and carried out Yahweh's mission to nations far and near. The call had actually been issued earlier, much earlier, before Jeremiah was born and before Yahweh formed him in his mother's womb. The Hebrew emphasizes the word "before." Yahweh told the young boy:

*Before I formed you in the belly I knew you
and before you came forth from the womb I declared you holy
a prophet to the nations I made you (1:5)*

Only Yahweh knew when the decision was made to call Jeremiah. It happened long before the present day. Like all great acts of God, it was hatched in secret (cf. Ps 139:15), and would forever remain a mystery to Jeremiah and others who heard of it later.

Jeremiah resisted the call, saying he was only a boy and knew not how to speak. A prophet, after all, must be able to carry messages; to kings, foreign ambassadors, other individuals, and the nation at large, telling them what Yahweh wanted communicated to them. Perhaps Jeremiah had heard from his father or some other priest at Anathoth about the call of Moses. Moses, too, had resisted Yahweh's call, and for much the same reason. He said he was not eloquent enough for the job (Exod 4:10).

But Yahweh overruled them both. To Moses he said that brother Aaron could assist him in his office. Jerome saw an important difference between the demur of Moses and that of Jeremiah. When Moses received his call he was a grown man (Exod 2:11), for which reason his resistance was met with a rebuke. Jeremiah, however, received more lenient treatment, reasoned Jerome, because at a young age fear and timidity are taken to be admirable traits.

Yahweh told Jeremiah not to resist because he was simply a boy, for he would be sent to all those whom Yahweh wanted to address, and he would speak to them all that Yahweh commanded him to speak (1:6-7). Jeremiah would be a royal messenger of Yahweh the King. Jeremiah was upfront in expressing his fear. And don't you imagine the boy Samuel was afraid too when Yahweh told him to relay to Eli the judgment that would befall him and his household? The Bible says he was indeed afraid when he rose up the following morning to open the doors of the Shiloh sanctuary (1 Sam 3:15). But he spoke to Eli all that Yahweh had revealed to him.

To Jeremiah Yahweh said what he or his angel had spoken to countless people in times past, and would continue to tell people in the future: "Fear not!" Jeremiah need not be afraid of those he will be afraid of. Yahweh

will be with him to rescue him. Jeremiah is then given the great promise occurring throughout the Bible: "I will be with you." It was given again (1:19; 15:20), and later made his own (20:11). Yahweh had said this to Moses (Exod 3:12), and the same promise was given later to the infant Church (Matt 28:20; cf. 1:23). Others received the "I will be with you" promise in the years in between (Gen 28:15; Josh 1:5; Judg 6:16; Isa 41:10; 43:5).

Then, in what appears to have been a visionary experience, Yahweh reached out to put his hand on the mouth of Jeremiah. One recalls the inaugural vision of Isaiah, where one of the seraphs touched the prophet's mouth with a burning coal from the altar (Isa 6:6-7). Yahweh said to Jeremiah: "Look, I have put my words in your mouth," indicating that Jeremiah was to be the "prophet like Moses." Yahweh had said to Moses: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and *I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him*" (Deut 18:18). A prophetic word had been fulfilled. On this very day, Yahweh was designating Jeremiah to become an overseer of nations and kingdoms, "to uproot and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build up and to plant" (1:10). It was to be a dual mission: to uproot and break down, yes, but also to build up and to plant. All this was happening now; still, it awaited a later fulfillment.

Then in what clearly was a visionary experience, perhaps occurring in an orchard at Anathoth in early February when the almond trees break out in full blossom, Yahweh had some gentle fun with Jeremiah by playing on a couple Hebrew words. He asked Jeremiah what he sees, and Jeremiah responds, "a branch of almond blossoms (*shaqed*)." Yahweh says he has seen rightly, for Yahweh will "watch over" (*shoqed*) his word to do it. Moses encountered Yahweh in a burning bush; now Jeremiah encounters him in a blossoming almond branch. Jeremiah, however, was not yet ready to accept the divine calling, at least he gives no indication that he does. He is not like Isaiah who, when the call went out to be Yahweh's messenger, volunteered with a "Here I am, send me" (Isa 6:8). Yahweh knows too that Jeremiah is not yet ready to take on the prophetic task, but his word will be fulfilled. Yahweh is watching over his word to do it (1:12).

JEREMIAH'S ACCEPTANCE OF THE CALL

We learn about Jeremiah's acceptance of the call only from a "confession" he makes later. It was when he had already been active for some time as a

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prophet, and the task had become well-nigh unbearable. Jeremiah recalled the finding of the law-book in the Temple and how it impacted him. It was a truly exciting time when the good King Josiah and all Jerusalem saw a purge of corrupted worship centers, a covenant renewal, and a great celebration of Passover (2 Kgs 22–23). Jeremiah says:

Your words were found, and I ate them
and your word was to me a joy
and for the gladness of my heart
For your name is called upon me
Yahweh God of hosts. (Jer 15:16)

There was no joy when Jeremiah first learned about his call to be a prophet, only fear and resistance (1:6). But now there was joy, the words “joy” and “gladness” here commonly being engagement terms. The suggestion has even been made that Jeremiah thought of himself as being “married” to Yahweh. “Gladness” was present on wedding days (Cant 3:11). But Jeremiah goes on to say that he separated himself from the crowd of merry-makers, and did not act jolly with them. He may have even absented himself from the Passover celebration. He sat all alone. Why? Because Yahweh’s hand rested upon him (15:17; cf. Isa 8:11; Ezek 3:14–15). Amidst this personal joy Yahweh had filled him with indignation, presumably over a covenant people not living in obedience to the Sinai covenant. Ezekiel, too, spent time alone after his calling to be a prophet (Ezek 3:15), and years later Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism by John (Mark 1:12–13). Paul, after his heavenly vision, did not rush to visit the apostles in Jerusalem, but went away for a time to Arabia to be alone (Gal 1:15–17).

Jeremiah goes on in this confession to ask why the joy in eating Yahweh’s words had turned to bitterness once the words entered his stomach. The same complaint was made by Ezekiel (Ezek 3:3, 14; cf. Rev 10:8–11). The Psalmist had said:

How sweet are your words to my taste
sweeter than honey to my mouth. (Ps 119:103)

But now, after finding their way into these prophets’ inner beings, sweet words had become bitter.

Yahweh then follows with a rebuke to Jeremiah about the sort of message he is preaching, whatever that message consisted of—Yahweh called it “worthless trash,” and called for a renewed commitment. Jeremiah was told to “return,” which in Hebrew can also translate as “repent.” If Jeremiah

does return, Yahweh will turn the people to him; Jeremiah will not turn to the people. We assume he did return, and in so doing accomplished what others were unable to do. Though Jeremiah would continue to experience hostility from people unwilling to hear Yahweh's true word, a promise is nevertheless made once again that Yahweh will be there to rescue him. This repeats what Jeremiah had been told as a young boy.

Jeremiah's acceptance of the divine call came then at the time the law-book was found, and he consumed words that were written upon it. They were Moses' words, but also Yahweh's words. The words had been promised five years earlier when Jeremiah first learned of his call (1:9). He now is about 17 or 18 years of age, old enough to begin his ministry as Yahweh's prophet.

JEREMIAH'S COMMISSIONING

Sometime after this acceptance of the call, how long after we do not know, but presumably not too long afterwards, Yahweh commissioned Jeremiah to begin a public ministry. The commissioning is recorded in 1:13–19. Here it states that Jeremiah received a word from Yahweh for the second time (1:13), which becomes an answer to the word coming in his call. Once again the revelation occurs in a vision. Probably like the first vision of the almond blossom, this vision also takes place out-of-doors, maybe at Jeremiah's home, maybe in the city of Jerusalem, or maybe anywhere. Jeremiah saw a cooking pot over fire with boiling water about to spill over in a southward direction. Yahweh said to Jeremiah: "From the north disaster shall be *opened up* on all the inhabitants of the land" (1:14). The meaning: An enemy will come and put its throne at the *opening* of the gates of Jerusalem" (1:15). Another wordplay in the Hebrew.

Yahweh was calling a "foe from the north" to descend upon Jerusalem and the cities of Judah. It was not a mythical foe, but a historical foe, one who would actually come and take seat in the gate of Jerusalem, where a judgment would then be rendered against the city. The city gate was the place where court was held and judgments were issued. Now the victors in war would be sitting there to decide the fate of the city. Yahweh says the foe would come against the *walls* of Jerusalem and the *cities* of Judah. The reason for the judgment—let no one misunderstand—was that Judah had forsaken Yahweh and turned to the worship of other gods. Jeremiah may have heard this message earlier from the Song of Moses (Deut 32:15–22),

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or he may have heard it summarized in the oracle Huldah gave after the Temple law book was found (1 Kgs 22:16–17). Or he may have heard it from both sources. It was this very message that galvanized King Josiah to purge polluted worship centers, declare a renewal of the covenant, and celebrate an elaborate Passover.

Jeremiah is told to tie up his tunic and prepare for speedy and decisive action. Now was the time to speak the words Yahweh commanded him. Jeremiah may find himself broken before his Judahite colleagues, but Yahweh tells him not to be so. If he is broken, Yahweh will break the good prophet before his detractors. But then follows a promise. Yahweh will offer to Jeremiah what he will not offer the people of Jerusalem and Judah: protection. Yahweh says:

And I, look I, have made you today into a fortified *city*, and into an iron pillar, and into *walls* of bronze over all the land—against the kings of Judah, against its princes, against its priests and against the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not overcome you, for I am with you—oracle of Yahweh—to rescue you. (Jer 1:18–19)

Once again Jeremiah gets the coveted “I am with you” promise from Yahweh. Jerusalem and Judah will not be rescued, but Jeremiah will be. The prophet has been duly commissioned and is now ready to begin a public ministry in the service of Yahweh God.