



Jeremiah's call: witness to a foresighted and farsighted god

Jeremiah 1.⁴⁻⁵

⁴Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

⁵"Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee;
and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee,
and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations."

Introduction

The text for this homily is the well-known and frequently quoted Jeremiah 1.⁴⁻⁵.

Within my LDS community I don't believe that I have ever heard the passage quoted, taught, or otherwise commented upon in any context other than as a proof text for the doctrine of a "pre-mortal" life. To the extent that teachers, students, preachers, and audiences have paid any attention to Jeremiah, the man, they have utilized other passages—most notably, Abraham 3.²²⁻²³—to speculate on the character Jeremiah must have developed during that existence, or "estate." God called Jeremiah as a prophet, "scholar" and "layman" alike have reasoned, specifically because He knew Jeremiah and the "nobility" of his character—a character developed during his pre-mortal existence.

Going further, these same "exegetes" have utilized this passage to deduce a "pre-mortal existence," not only for Jeremiah but for every mortal man and woman on earth as well. It is further asserted that every mortal being developed characteristics—noble, ignoble, and everywhere in between—during their pre-mortal life that go a long way toward explaining not only their present spiritual state and status, but their present state and status in other

matters—matters as mundane as national origins and economic status.

The reader may be excused for feeling that this is a rather heavy lift for such a brief passage. He or she may or may not believe in a pre-mortal existence. There are, of course, other ways to understand the text that do not involve speculative existences. The text is certainly not so transparent as to *demand* that one believes Jeremiah, or anyone else lived a pre-mortal life.

But, really, and far more importantly, whether one believes in a pre-mortal existence or not is beside the point. Proof texting this verse, as proof texting usually does, misses the point of the text, and, in this case, of the self-revelation that Yahweh so graciously bestowed upon Jeremiah. If the reader noted that the LDS reader and commentator rarely if ever utilize the passage to explore God and his character, I congratulate him or her for their astuteness.

If one wishes to expound upon a cherished doctrine—in this case, a pre-mortal existence—fine. Have at it. But, please, do not do so to the exclusion of the real story. Yahweh's declaration, it seems to me, was never intended as a statement about a pre-mortal existence—Jeremiah's or anyone else's. It was not meant to draw Jeremiah's mind to himself. It was not intended to draw any future reader's mind to the man, Jeremiah. It was most certainly not meant to recommend Jeremiah, or his character as reason for his call.

But, that's probably enough said, already, about what Yahweh's call-statement is *not* about and what it is *not* intended to do. So, what *is* it about and what *does* Yahweh intend Jeremiah and all future readers to take from the call? This will be the subject of this homily.

i and thee, subject-verb-direct object

To begin our examination of the focus, meanings and intentions behind Yahweh's call-statement, let's have another look at our text. What do you notice?

“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee;
and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee,
and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”

I don't know what you see, but the first thing I see is grammar. I see subjects. I see verbs. I see direct objects. Oh, what fun!

“I formed thee”
“I knew thee”
“I sanctified thee”
“I ordained thee.”

Who is the “I” and who is the “thee”? Put differently, who is the subject/actor, and who is the object/the one acted upon?

Obviously, in every case, Yahweh is the subject. He is the text's only actor. Jeremiah is always the direct object, the one acted upon. Nowhere does Yahweh allow Jeremiah to be the subject of any verb or any sentence. The text has no “I” representing Jeremiah.

Is this grammatical arrangement significant? If so, how? What are we to understand from it? We might be tempted to dismiss this grammatical arrangement as interpretatively insignificant. But this would seem unwise, as the arrangement remains in place throughout the remainder of the call narrative.

“But *the LORD* said unto me, ‘Say not, I *am* a child: for thou shalt go to all that *I shall send thee*, and whatsoever *I command thee* thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for *I am with thee to deliver thee*, saith the LORD.’

“Then *the LORD* put forth his hand, and *touched my mouth*. And the LORD said unto me, ‘Behold, *I have put my words in thy mouth*. See, *I have this day set thee* over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down,

to build, and to plant.”¹

Clearly, it is Yahweh who is doing all the heavy lifting. He says. He sends. He commands. He is with. He delivers. He puts forth. He touches. He places. He sets. He roots out, pulls down, destroys, throws down, builds and plants.

“But,” one might object, “Jeremiah is the subject of a verb or two or three.” Indeed. First, there are these two.

“Say not...”

“Be not afraid”

Here, the verbs involve actions and attitudes in which Jeremiah is *not* to engage. Not exactly the stuff of action heroes.

Jeremiah seems to be the subject in “thou shalt speak,” but this is muted by the preceding, “whatsoever *I command thee*.” Jeremiah is clearly not the principle actor/speaker even here.

Finally, there is the final “*I have this day set thee* over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant,” with its verbs “root out,” “pull down,” “destroy,” “throw down,” “build,” and “plant.” It seems clear that it is not Jeremiah doing these wonders, but Yahweh.

These grammatical arrangements, I maintain, are not insignificant. They are central to an accurate interpretation of Yahweh’s initial call statement and the emphasis that should be placed upon it. This is true, in fact, for the entire call narrative.

Yahweh saw Jeremiah coming long before his actual arrival on the scene. This revelation of divine foresight is not intended to draw Jeremiah’s or any future reader’s mind to the man, Jeremiah, to his capacities or the lack thereof, or to any possible pre-mortal existence. Rather, it is intended to draw Jeremiah’s and every future reader’s attention to Yahweh, Himself, the

¹ Verses 7-10; emphasis added

great I AM. It is meant to recommend Yahweh, a God of extraordinary foresight, to Jeremiah as well as all future readers. If “nobility” plays a role in Jeremiah’s call, it is the nobility of God, not the creature, Jeremiah, formed in a mud swamp.

It is, nonetheless, a sign of mankind’s insecure self-absorption that both the original audience of one, Jeremiah, and so many audiences since, have managed to transmute the glorious divine self-revelation that God so magnanimously offered of Himself into a conversation about creatures of the mud swamp.

doubting jeremiah

One would think that upon being informed by the glorious Being, Yahweh, that He had long ago seen you coming and had made plans to use you for His salvific purposes, you would be utterly enraptured in the wonder of His Being, His character, His foresightedness, and His farsightedness. I, for one, can think of a million questions I would like to ask such a marvelous Being. So, we might be forgiven for being a little disappointed in Jeremiah’s small-minded and self-centered response to the expansive and outward-looking divine self-revelation.

“Then said I, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.’”

If we get over our disappointment with Jeremiah’s response, we might chalk Jeremiah’s self-centeredness up to personal insecurity. Even more charitably, we might chalk it up to our domesticated² humility: “I can’t do it.” “I’m not the right man for the job.”

Now, we will certainly not quibble with Jeremiah’s self-assessment. It is, of course, accurate. Jeremiah does not possess the skills necessary to the task at hand. He cannot produce the words necessary to accomplish Yahweh’s purposes.

² I have discussed “humility” elsewhere and the ways in which we domesticate or tame what is, in fact, a rather intimidating human trait.

But, Jeremiah's "I cannot speak," is as superfluous as Moses' "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh,"³ or Isaiah's "I am a man of unclean lips,"⁴ or Peter's "I am a sinful man, O Lord."⁵ None of them are telling Yahweh anything He doesn't already know. Yahweh has always known that no one is up to the heavy tasks associated with and requisite to the work of salvation or even speaking the words that describe that unimaginable work.

So it is that Yahweh's call of Jeremiah as His mouthpiece is decidedly not based on any capabilities the man may or may not possess. The call is not based on any "nobility" he may or may not have developed. Jeremiah needs have no insight, no foresight, or any farsightedness. Whatever capabilities he may possess are next to meaningless as it is Yahweh who will do all the talking, all the revealing, and all the saving. This is clear from the grammatical arrangement with its consistent placement of Yahweh as the only actor.

For this reason, Jeremiah's self-centered response to the call: "I cannot speak: for I am a child," looks like something other than simple humility and is about something far darker than self-doubt. In truth, Jeremiah's, "I don't know what to say," is really a repudiation of Yahweh's initial self-revelation—"I know you and will use you." In it, Jeremiah expresses doubt about Yahweh and his capabilities:

"Oh no, you don't. You know nothing about me. You lack the capability to use and empower me."

Jeremiah is Peter sinking into the sea without having first taken a step or two on its surface. He is doubting Thomas, in need of evidence. Though it might be a simple matter of reportage, at least we can say that Jeremiah's resistance to the call is not quite so involved and extended as was that of Moses, who managed to come up with one excuse after another. But, that is the subject for another homily.

³ Exodus 3.¹¹

⁴ Isaiah 6.⁵

⁵ Luke 5.⁸

What we have here is a failure of imagination

We might accept Jeremiah's excuses and hesitancy to accept the call had not Yahweh so clearly revealed Himself, and his ability to qualify Jeremiah, whatever capabilities the man may or may not possess. But Yahweh did reveal himself. He did make it clear that Jeremiah's call was about His, Yahweh's, character and abilities, not those of Jeremiah.

Understand, please. I do not mean to demean Jeremiah. I love Jeremiah. There are few Biblical characters I relate to more than him. To my way of thinking, the book that bears his name is a marvel. Yet, Jeremiah is little different than any of the rest of us. His is a failure of imagination. He lacks the imagination to truly appreciate the magnificent scope of Deity, or His generous willingness to utilize individuals as incapable as all of us are.

So, we simply welcome Jeremiah to the club. It is, as we have suggested, a club with a huge membership.

Regular readers of and listeners to my homilies already know of my appreciation for the Psalms. Its wonders, for me, far surpass those of Jeremiah's magnificent work. The Psalmist, too, lacks imagination. But he is at all times fully aware of his deficiency. The Psalmist often expresses his awe at Yahweh's farsightedness in all matters related to individuality and, indeed, to all matters related to humanity writ large.

“O LORD, thou hast searched me,
and known me.
Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising,
thou understandest my thought afar off.
Thou compassest my path and my lying down,
and art acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word in my tongue,
but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether.
Thou hast beset me behind and before,
and laid thine hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high, I cannot attain unto it.”⁶

“Innumerable and unimaginable are the things that you,
even You, Yahweh, my God, have done
and purposed for us.

There is no describing them!
I try to make them comprehensible and put them into words,
but they are too expansive for words.”⁷

We have called this a failure of imagination, and so it is. But this failure is not only due to mankind’s deficiencies. It is really about Divinity’s infinity of excellencies.

“Great is our Lord, and of great power:
his understanding is infinite.”⁸

Isaiah shared the Psalmist’s perspective.

“Hast thou not known?
hast thou not heard,
that the everlasting God, the LORD,
the Creator of the ends of the earth,
fainteth not, neither is weary?
there is no searching of his understanding.”⁹

And even this, knowledge too wonderful for any of us, even this is child’s play in the economy of God.

⁶ Psalm 139.^{1-4, 5}

⁷ Psalm 40.⁵, author’s translation

⁸ Psalm 147.⁵

⁹ Isaiah 40.²⁸

“The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens.
Who is like unto the LORD our God,
who dwelleth on high,
Who humbleth himself
to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!”¹⁰

God never slumbers or sleeps. Neither does he ever puzzle over a matter related to humanity or any other of his innumerable creations, big or small, simple or complex.

Conclusion

In calling Jeremiah, Yahweh names himself as One who knows what no mortal being can know and possesses capabilities that no mortal being can possess or even conceive. This includes an unfathomable farsightedness in human affairs. More to the point of the call, it includes his farsighted knowledge of the one, lone, seemingly insignificant individual named Jeremiah.

“Before *I* formed thee in the belly *I* knew thee.

If he was listening, Jeremiah had heard this message before, delivered to his far-distant progenitor, Abraham.

“My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee.”¹¹

He heard it in the witness of the greatest of all Hebrew witnesses, Moses.

“...there is no God be-side me, and all things are present with me, for I know them all.”¹²

¹⁰ Palm 113.⁴⁻⁶

¹¹ Abraham 2.⁸

¹² Moses 1.⁶

And he had heard it from perhaps the greatest of all Hebrew poets, Isaiah.

“Behold, the former things are come to pass,
and new things do I declare:
before they spring forth I tell you of them.”¹³

“Remember the former things of old:
for I am God, and there is none else;
I am God, and there is none like me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
and from ancient times the things that are not yet done,
saying, My counsel shall stand,
and I will do all my pleasure...”¹⁴

Such mind-blowing foresight is to be expected from one who is named by his own mouth,
“Alfa and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the First and the Last,”¹⁵ “from everlasting
to everlasting.”¹⁶

Wherever this capacity came from or however it was acquired—and whoever and whatever
Jeremiah was or was not—God’s interest in revealing the truth of its existence is to focus
Jeremiah’s mind, and the mind of every future reader upon the magnificence that is Yahweh.
This makes it all the sadder that Jeremiah, and so many after him, have permitted the call
narrative to shift their focus from Him who calls Himself “the greatest of all”¹⁷ to the
admittedly small and at times pitiful Jeremiah.

Certainly, this revelation may precipitate, as it does in Jeremiah’s case, a reaction such as
his, or that of Moses—“Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never

¹³ Isaiah 42.⁹

¹⁴ 46.⁹⁻¹⁰

¹⁵ Rev. 1.^{8, 17}

¹⁶ DC 61.¹

¹⁷ DC 19.¹⁸

had supposed.”¹⁸ Yet, it is intended to lead to the far greater revelation: “God is everything.”

Or, as the Psalmist so beautifully declares without equivocation,

“His name alone is excellent.”¹⁹

This, it seems to me, is the import of Yahweh’s own, “I am that I am.”²⁰

And this is what I hear in Jeremiah’s call and in Yahweh’s declaration,

“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee;
and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee,
and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”

It is why, too, that a humble missionary’s witness remains to this day the one thought that I wish never to forget; the one thought I wish to carry with me into the next unknown future; the one I wish to sing forever as but one member of a huge, innumerable eternal choir.

“Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, we will praise our God forever. Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.”²¹

“Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

¹⁸ Moses 1.¹⁰

¹⁹ Psalm 148.¹³

²⁰ Exodus 3.¹⁴

²¹ Alma 26.¹⁶