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An Exegetical Analysis of Jeremiah 1:5: The Presence of Free Will and Choice

Daniel Xisto
Andrews University

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Recommended Citation

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Andrews University
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF JEREMIAH 1:5
THE PRESENCE OF FREE WILL AND CHOICE

A Research Paper
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Course
OTST 555 Prophets

by
Daniel Xisto
April 2011

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INTRODUCTION

The book of Jeremiah begins with the prophet's distinctive call to ministry. Jeremiah 1:5 states that before Jeremiah was born, even before he was formed in his mother's womb, the Lord had specific plans for his life. Scholars widely interpret this passage to mean that God predestined the course of Jeremiah's life. There is a surprising absence of commentaries and scholarly articles that exegete and interpret Jeremiah 1:5 as saying anything other than what has always been accepted, that Jeremiah's life was predestined.

However, sound biblical exegesis reveals that the clearest reading of Jeremiah 1:5 testifies to God's sovereignty mingled with humanity's free will. This research paper will show that even during the collapse of the kingdom of Judah, the Lord, wanting to save His children, never forced or predestined the will of Jeremiah. The following exegesis points to an alternate reading, one of free will and choice.

The scope of this paper is limited to Jeremiah 1:5 due to time limitations inherent in this course. Notwithstanding, the objective of this research is to illuminate a passage of

Scripture that has long been painted with the broad brush of predestination. In so doing, the author of this paper seeks to point the reader to a clearer understanding of God's all-loving, ever-respecting, and eternally permitting stance toward humanity's total and complete freedom of will and freedom of choice.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

Predestination can be broadly defined as the theological doctrine which maintains that God has sovereignly determined the history of all things, arbitrarily electing some to eternal life while similarly condemning others.¹ In other words, an individual's life calling—that is, his earthly and eternal destinies—are predetermined by God without possibility of change and irrespective of his choices in life. Countless theologians and biblical commentators have interpreted Jeremiah 1:5 from the context of this worldview as will now be demonstrated.

J. A. Thompson, author of a commentary on the book of Jeremiah, endorses the predestination view, asserting that predestination was vital to the psyche of the prophet when coping with the trials that attended his prophetic office. Thompson further maintains that Jeremiah's "awareness that he had been predestined to occupy the prophetic office since his birth" would serve as a substantial encouragement for the prophet should despair try to creep into his mind.² Similarly,

¹ Leanne VanDyke, "Predestination," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (2000), 1081.

William L. Holladay, author of a commentary on the first 25 chapters of Jeremiah, presupposes the same nuance of determinism when describing the prophet's call from God: "[It] remains true that the experience of the providence of God attracts men and women throughout history to such language of predestination."³

Other commentators, such as John Bright, voice their agreement: "[Jeremiah's call's] salient features are: Jeremiah's awareness that he had been predestined for the prophetic office since before his birth."⁴ Ostensibly, there is no doubt in Bright's mind that Jeremiah was destined to be a prophet, regardless of the latter's will. In like manner, commentator Ernest W. Nicholson submits, "Jeremiah believed himself to be predestined."⁵ Nicholson further observes that Isaiah (Isaiah 49:1,5) and the apostle Paul (Galatians 1:15) had

² J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 145.

³ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1, A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 33.

⁴ John Bright, *Jeremiah, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), 6-7.

⁵ Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 24.

similar unalterable callings.⁶ John L. Mackay voices his agreement, stating that God has "determined what destiny should be for each."⁷ Thompson, Holladay, Bright, Mackay and Nicholson represent the majority of scholarship on Jeremiah, which presupposes predestination without entertaining the slightest possibility of free will.

A final argument worth noting is that of John Skinner, author of *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah*. Skinner, though believing in the *personal predestination* of Jeremiah to be a prophet, adds a caveat. He submits that Jeremiah's understanding of his individual predestination was not "a truth suddenly injected into the mind from without...but a conviction formed within, an intuitive perception."⁸ However, Mackay disagrees with Skinner, urging that this concept of "conviction formed within," be "totally rejected."⁹ Mackay contends that the prophet's call was a call

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John L. Mackay, Volume 1: Chapters 1-20, *Jeremiah: A Mentor Commentary* (Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 96.

⁸ John Skinner, *Prophecy & Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1936) 27.

⁹ John L. Mackay, 94-95.

precisely because it came unexpectedly *from an external sources* and challenged *the prophet's* expectations.¹⁰

Notwithstanding Skinner and Mackay's disagreement about when and how the prophet became aware of his fate, they, like the other aforementioned commentators, unswervingly hold to predestination as the appropriate schema for understanding Jeremiah 1:5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Jeremiah was from the priestly line of Hilkiah, whose family dwelt in Anathoth, a small village approximately three miles northeast of Jerusalem, the capital of Judah.¹¹ The time period in which Jeremiah received his call to prophetic ministry was exceptionally tumultuous in the history of the kingdom of Judah. Within the span of twenty-three years (609 B.C. - 586 B.C.), five kings would lay claim to its throne. This turbulent time concluded with Judah's defeat and total destruction in 586 B.C. at the hands of Babylon, the world's emerging super power.¹² Jeremiah received his call in 627 B.C, the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign (1:4).¹³ He lived and ministered through this politically, socially and economically unstable period, witnessing both the ruin of the beloved city of Jerusalem under the reign of Zedekiah, as well as the shameful captivity of his

¹¹ Peter C. Craigie, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., Page H. Kelley, *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1991), 2.

¹² Ibid, 3. There are groupings of scholars who have the date of Judah's destruction as 586 B.C., of which this author agrees. The Word Biblical Commentary date is 587 B.C.

¹³ Ibid. Scholarship has also shown a possibility for this date to be 626 B.C.

fellow citizens.¹⁴ This scene of collapse amidst monumental world change was the context of Jeremiah's appeal to his erring nation, pleading for their return to spiritual fidelity.

The account of Jeremiah's call to prophetic ministry is captured in the book's first chapter (1:1-19). The call can be divided into four sections: the editorial superscription (v 1-3), the call proper (v 4-10), two visions (v 11-14) and expansions (v 15-19).¹⁵ Below is a table containing the text this research considers (1:5):

a) Before I formed you in the belly I knew you	('a בטרם רָאצוּ בַבֶּטֶן יָדַעְתִּיךָ
b) And before you came out of the womb I sanctified you	('b וּבִטְרָם תֵּצֵא מִרֶחֶם הַקֹּדֶשֶׁתִיךָ
c) I appointed you a prophet to the nations	('c נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ:

The reader may note that immediately preceding this verse the passage (1:4) opens a dialogue between the LORD and Jeremiah: "Then the word of the LORD came to me saying," (1:4). Dialogue with the LORD at the commencement of prophetic ministry is not

¹⁴ John Bright, *Jeremiah, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), xxviii.

¹⁵ William L. Holladay, *The Architecture of Jeremiah 1-20* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1976), 27.

uncommon to the Israelite (see Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1). This text is set in poetic frame,¹⁶ containing four pairings of phrases in both a' and b', creating a strong parallel structure, concluding in c'.

A critical reading and exegesis of this parallel structure shows the reader that there is abundant biblical evidence pointing to an alternative to predestination. The first pairing this research will consider is that of **בטרם** (before), prepositions denoting time. This term is often used in the context of birth/creation and death (compare Isaiah 42:9; 66:7; Psalm 39:14; 90:2).¹⁷ With the repetition of **בטרם** in both a' and b', a reader may accurately conclude that the time when the LORD both knew and sanctified Jeremiah came long before Jeremiah's time on this earth. It is as though the LORD is saying there is no merit outside of His grace and that Jeremiah was chosen as a result of this grace. God repeats Himself twice to make sure the point is well understood.

Some students of the Bible view the above-mentioned verses to provide compelling evidence of Jeremiah's predestination from

¹⁶ J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah/Lamentations*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 49.

¹⁷ William L. Holladay, 33.

birth. However, there are indications that speak otherwise. Staying within the prophet's own writing, the reader finds a very similar coupling of **בטרם** in Jeremiah 13:16, "Give glory to the LORD your God, before He brings darkness and before your feet stumble," (NASB). Here the prophet is clearly delivering a conditional prophecy via a parallel structure that includes the word **בטרם**. Judah chose not to heed the warning of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah. Just as the nation for which Jeremiah was so earnestly laboring was given the choice to either listen to or ignore the word of the LORD, perhaps Jeremiah was afforded that same choice in 1:5, thus invalidating the concept of predestination.

The next two sets of pairings in the sequence are (A) **אצורך** (I formed you) with (A') **תצא** (you came out), and (B) **בבטן** (in the belly) with (B') **מרחם** (from the womb). Here the reader may observe a simple structure of two qal active verbs followed by their corresponding prepositional phrases containing like nouns. This parallel structure piques in the final pairing.

Before discussing the significance of this climaxing pair, it is worth noting that evidence has been given for an alternative reading of **אצורך**, the qere', which has been read to

mean 'I formed you.' Instead, Holladay points to the ketib as 'I summoned you' and suggests that this is the proper meaning.¹⁸ Another example of this would be found in Isaiah 49:1, 5, which offers both meanings. With this rendering, Jeremiah 1:5 would read 'I summoned you' and 'you came out.' This wording denotes a clearer connection between God's call and Jeremiah's response, leading the reader to more fully appreciate the climaxing pair.

The parallel structure culminates with a pair of two verbs: the qal perfect **ידעתך** translated in the past tense (I knew you), and **הקדשתך** the hifil perfect which is translated with a causative function (I consecrated you). The reader should now consider these verbs and their connection, if any, with predestination. Beginning with **ידעתך** (I knew you), this precise phrase occurs for the first time in Exodus 33:12, in which the LORD states that He has known Moses by name. And earlier in the passage, He says He speaks with Moses face to face (Ex 33:11). This *knowing* is much more than a mere intellectual knowledge; it is a deep and intimate understanding of another, or a relationship. For example, Adam **ידע** (knew) his wife and she gave birth (Genesis 4:1). In other words, Adam had sexual relations

¹⁸ Ibid.

with Eve. Similarly, God had an intimate knowledge of Jeremiah because He ידע Jeremiah.

The question remains whether or not this *knowing* is in any way a commitment to predestination. More light can be shed on this inquiry by looking at the second time outside of Jeremiah 1:5 where the phrase ידעתִיךְ is used, which is in the book of Hosea. Hosea 13:5 is widely translated as 'I cared for you,' but could also read, 'I knew you.' This verse refers to the backslidden tribe of Ephraim. The LORD presents His case, as it were, in an attempt to woo the sin-filled tribe back from Baal into a life of purity and fidelity to Him. However, Ephraim chose Baal instead of the LORD. In this case, the LORD's intimate knowledge (ידעתִיךְ) of Ephraim did not determine or predestine Ephraim to turn back to Him. The backslidden tribe chose to pursue its course of unfaithfulness notwithstanding the LORD's having intimately known it.

In the parallel mentioned above, the corresponding phrase to ידעתִיךְ (I knew you) is הקדשתִיךְ (I consecrated you). In this repetition, the second verb is an intensification of the first. First, the reader notices that ידעתִיךְ is in the qal perfect form and that הקדשתִיךְ is in the hifil perfect form. The language has

shifted to a causative state. Not only does the LORD simply know Jeremiah, albeit intimately; He is causing Jeremiah to be holy. The second verb portrays that additional effort that the LORD has invested in Jeremiah.

As with the verbal clause 'I knew you,' 'I consecrated you,' does not denote or connote predestination. **הקדשתך** with the pronoun **ך** (you) is not found anywhere else in Scripture. Without the pronoun, it is found in six other places: Numbers 3:13, 8:17; Judges 17:3; 1 Kings 9:3, 9:7; 2 Chronicles 7:20. It will suffice to consider the two passages in 1 Kings. After completing construction of the temple, Solomon's prayer to the LORD was heard. In 1 Kings 9:3 the LORD states, "I have *consecrated* this house which you have built by putting My name there forever," (NASB). Then the LORD sets a condition to His prophesy in verses 6-7: "But if you or your sons indeed turn away from following Me . . . then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them, and the house which I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight." Here, if the condition was not met, the consecration of the Lord would become void. Therefore, the LORD's consecration (**הקדשתך**) of a

thing—an action more intense than ידעתִיךָ (I knew you)—is nevertheless not the same as predestination.

Finally, attention will be given to the concluding phrase נתתיך (I appointed you). There is corroborating evidence as early as Jeremiah 1:17-18 that the Lord afforded Jeremiah a choice. The verbal clause נתתיך later appears in verse 18, where the Lord tells Jeremiah, “I have made you today as a fortified city,” (NASB). At first, it sounds like the LORD predestined Jeremiah to be a fortified city because this is in the qal perfect form, indicating a completed action. The key here is to look at 1:17, which sheds light on the use of נתתיך in verse 18: “Arise, and speak to them all which I command you do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them,” (NASB). If Jeremiah had been predestined to be a fortified city, then the LORD’s promise to dismay him seems out of place. Implied in the LORD’s statement that He will dismay Jeremiah is the assumption that Jeremiah truly has a choice to make.

In light of the analysis above, in all three main verbs, ידעתִיךָ, הקדשתִיךָ, and נתתיך, the reader may clearly identify the presence of choice and free will.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while Jeremiah 1:5 has been read extensively through the lenses of predestination, this research has presented a sound argument for the presence of free will. Deconstructing the parallel structure of this verse and analyzing its four pairings and climaxing verbs, both within the book of Jeremiah and elsewhere in the Old Testament, provides strong evidence for a reading of choice in Jeremiah 1:5. The presumption of predestination has gone unchallenged for an extensive period. However this research has demonstrated that biblical exegesis reveals an alternate reading that eradicates the previous norm.

Despite the ominous collapse of the kingdom of Judah and the Lord's certain desire to save His children, in His consecration of Jeremiah as a prophet to warn them, He did not cast off the prophet's privilege of choice.

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