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Formed in and Called from the Womb

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FORMED IN AND CALLED FROM THE WOMB

Dana M. Pike

Abstract: *Drawing on his deep knowledge of biblical Hebrew, Dana Pike gives us a close reading of Jeremiah 1:5, the most important Old Testament verse relating to the Latter-day Saint understanding of premortal existence of human spirits and the foreordination of prophets to their appointed callings. He shows that the plain sense of this verse cannot be easily dismissed: first, and consistent with Latter-day Saint understanding, God knew Jeremiah before he was conceived and that afterward, in a second phase that transpired in the womb, he was, “according to the Israelite perspective preserved in the Bible,” appointed to become a prophet.*

[**Editor’s Note:** Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.]

See Dana M. Pike, “Formed in and Called from the Womb,” in *“To Seek the Law of the Lord”: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 317–32. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

Jeremiah’s call narrative or vocation report includes a clear example of pre-birth divine election:

(1:4) “Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

(1:5a) ‘Before I formed you in the womb [*babbeten*] I knew you,

(5b) and before you were born [came forth from the womb/*mēreḥem*] I consecrated you;

(5c) I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:4–5; NRSV).¹

However, there is ambiguity about the meaning of the phrase “from the womb” and there are persistent questions about the relationship between Jeremiah 1:5a—“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you”—and 1:5b+c, “before you were born [came forth from the womb/*mēreḥem*] I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Therefore, this paper engages other biblical texts mentioning in-womb election to determine if the Bible itself provides a clearer indication of the meaning of divine election “from the womb” and how Jeremiah 1:5a and 1:5b+c ought to be understood in relation to each other.²

I argue that *in its biblical context* this passage claims YHWH “knew” Jeremiah before Jeremiah was conceived, and that he was later chosen to be a prophet by YHWH *in the womb*, distinguishing between pre-conception “knowing” (although exactly what that entails is not clear from the passage itself) and post-conception but pre-birth “consecrating” and “appointing.”³ However, such an approach is at least

I consider it an honor to participate in this volume celebrating Jack Welch’s career and accomplishments. With energy and vision, Jack has contributed greatly to Latter-day Saint scholarship. And he has been active and gracious in encouraging and supporting others engaged in the same pursuit. The first version of this paper was presented several years ago in a “Latter-day Saints and the Bible” session at a national Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) meeting (as part of a larger study of mine on Jeremiah 1:5). Jack was instrumental in creating this SBL section, which continues to live on.

1 All English translations of biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted. I note in passing that there is a difference of scholarly opinion on whether Jeremiah 1:5 is poetry or not. Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah* (OTL commentary series; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 24, considers it prose (“I judge only vv. 14b–19 [in chapter 1] to be poetry”), as do others. Contrast the comments of Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20* (Anchor Bible; NY: Doubleday, 1999), 227, who thinks verse 5 is poetry.

2 For a review of the concept of divine election and a survey of biblical and extra-biblical examples, see Dana M. Pike, “Before Jeremiah Was: Divine Election in the Ancient Near East,” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 33–59.

3 Because of its focus on a topic in the Hebrew Bible, in this paper I have chosen the commonly used form “YHWH” to represent the divine name of Israel’s God, which occurs in Hebrew as *yhwh*, which is also represented by the hybrid anglicized form “Jehovah” and the substitute designation “the LORD.” For further discussion of this name and these forms, see Dana M. Pike, “The Name and Titles of God in the Old

implicitly rejected by many commentators who understand Jeremiah 1:5 to indicate that the sum total of YHWH's knowing, consecrating, and appointing of Jeremiah all took place either before conception *or* after conception, depending on the authors and their perspectives.

Hebrew Nouns translated “Womb”

Two Hebrew nouns, *beṭen* and *reḥem*, are often rendered “womb” in English translations of the Bible.⁴ The term *beṭen*, designates “innards, belly.” A passage in which *beṭen* refers to the general abdominal area—in a man—is Judges 3:21: “then Ehud...took the sword from his right thigh, and thrust it into Eglon’s belly [*beṭen*]” (see also, Job 32:19; Ezek. 3:3). This noun is also used figuratively, as in Jonah 2:2 (Hebrew Bible [HB] v. 3), “I called to the LORD out of my distress,...out of the belly [*beṭen*] of Sheol I cried” (see also, Job 38:29). An example of a passage in which the noun *beṭen* denotes a female womb is Genesis 25:24: “When her [Rebekah’s] time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb [*beṭen*]” (see also, Gen. 38:27; Eccles. 11:5).

The other Hebrew noun, *reḥem*, is *only* used in reference to females, as opposed to *beṭen*, which, as illustrated above, can refer to the innards of a male or a female. Thus, *reḥem* is routinely translated “womb.”⁵ The noun *reḥem* occurs in such passages as Genesis 29:31, “when the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb [*reḥem*]; but Rachel was barren,” and Exodus 13:2, “Consecrate to me [YHWH] all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb [*reḥem*] among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.” Job 38:8 contains an example of the figurative use of *reḥem*, with the sea bursting forth “from the womb” when YHWH created the earth.

Testament,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17–31, especially 19–21; and Dana M. Pike, “Biblical Hebrew Words You Already Know, and Why They are Important,” *Religious Educator* 7, no. 3 (2006): 97–114, especially 106–09.

4 For a fuller discussion and further citations of these terms, see Esther Fuchs, “Breasts and Womb,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online*, ed. Christine Helmer, et al. Vol. 4 (New York: Walter de Gruyter), 453–56 (http://www.degruyter.com/view/EBR/MainLemma_10196?pi=0&moduleId=common-word-wheel&dbJumpTo=breasts.) See also, T. Kronholm, “*reḥem*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, rev. ed., ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. by David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 13:454–59.

5 As indicated in most Hebrew lexica, the relationship between the noun *reḥem* and the verbal root *rh̄m*, usually translated “to have mercy, to love,” is not entirely clear. The latter is generally considered to be denominative.

Several biblical passages contain *beṭen* and *reḥem* in parallel, including Jeremiah 1:5 (quoted above), Job 31:15 (quoted below), and Psalms 22:10 (KJV; HB v. 11): “I was cast upon thee from the womb [*reḥem*]: thou art my God from my mother’s belly [*beṭen*].”⁶ Other terms that refer generally to a person’s inner torso and sometimes occur in parallel with *reḥem* or *beṭen* are *kilyōt* and *mē’im*.

Three important points of biblical theology are evident in connection with the use of *beṭen* and *reḥem*. First, God creates people in the womb. For example, Psalms 139:13 reads, “For it was you [YHWH] who formed my inward parts [*kilyōt*]; you knit me together in my mother’s womb [*beṭen*].” And Job rhetorically asks: “Did not he [God] who made me in the womb [*beṭen*] make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb [*reḥem*]?” (Job 31:15; see also, Isa. 44:2, 24).⁷ Second, God “opens” or “closes” the womb of a woman, allowing her to conceive or not. For example, 1 Samuel 1:5 reads: “the LORD had closed her [Hannah’s] womb” (see also, Gen. 29:31, quoted above, and Gen. 30:2). And third, arguably utilizing midwife imagery, it is God who brings people forth from the womb, causing them to live. For example, “Why did you [God] bring me forth from the womb?” (Job 10:18; see also Ps. 22:9 [HB v. 10]; 71:6). Thus, a woman’s womb is the place of God’s creation, of first human life.⁸ The language of these biblical womb- and birth-related reports has led Leslie Allen to correctly observe, “There is nothing special about the language of fetal development; the attribution to a divine creative shaping is a glorious commonplace.”⁹

6 Modern translations often attempt to avoid the repetition of womb/womb or womb/belly. Thus, the NRSV translates this verse, “On you I was cast from my birth [literally, “from the womb,” *reḥem*], and from the womb [*beṭen*] of my mother you have been my God.”

7 Just as YHWH gave life in the womb, so he could terminate it there: “because he [YHWH] did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave” (Jer. 20:17; see also Job 10:18–19).

8 As Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel, The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 112, has observed, “except for God’s involvement in biblical pregnancies, the Bible lacks any explicit theory of precisely how pregnancy occurs. Of course, sexual intercourse is often—but not always—alluded to or mentioned in bringing about pregnancy, but the Hebrew Bible never explicitly acknowledges the substances involved in bringing about pregnancy.” However, at least some awareness of these substances is indicated in passages such as Gen. 38:6–9 and Lev. 12:2.

9 Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah*, 25. Additionally, see the language of Isa. 46:3, which depicts YHWH as a pregnant mother: “Listen to me, O house of Jacob,...who have been borne by me from your birth [*minnî-beṭen*], carried from the womb [*minnî-reḥem*].”

The prepositions and verbs used with *beṭen* and *reḥem* in these and related passages play an important role in the discussion that follows. This general overview of these two nouns provides a basis to now examine biblical passages that contain the phrase “from the womb” and to then deal with divine election claims containing *reḥem* and/or *beṭen*.

The Phrase “from the womb”

Of the biblical passages containing *babbēṭen* or *baṛeḥem*, “in the womb,” only Jeremiah 1:5 involves divine election, utilizing as it does both *babbēṭen* and *mēreḥem*. Election passages that mention the womb typically employ the forms *mēreḥem* and especially *mibbēṭen*, “from the womb.”¹⁰ (In the Hebrew Bible, the final letter, *n*, in the preposition *min*, “from,” often assimilates to the following consonant, which is then doubled [*mibbēṭen*] or causes compensatory lengthening of the vowel [*mēreḥem*].) However, there is an inherent challenge in how to understand the intended meaning of the phrase “from the womb” in certain passages.

The translation of some texts containing *mēreḥem* and *mibbēṭen* is straightforward. For example, Job 1:21 and Jeremiah 20:18 are routinely understood as meaning “from within the womb.” This is because of the action involved:

Job 1:21: “He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb [*mibbēṭen*].’”¹¹

Jeremiah 20:18: “Why did I come forth from the womb [*mēreḥem*] to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?” (see also Ps. 22:10 [HB v. 9]; Job 3:11).

Here, “borne by me from (within) the womb” would be a better rendition, since it is paralleled by “carried from (within) the womb.”

10 To be clear, these forms also occur in passages that have nothing to do with election, such as Judg. 3:22 and Jer. 20:18. See below. In the main, the Hebrew preposition *min*, “from,” is used in the Bible with spatial (locational and directional), temporal, originating, and partitive senses. For discussion with examples, see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 11.2.11.

11 Interestingly, the next phrase in this verse, “and naked shall I return there,” figuratively references the earth as a type of womb. Job came forth from his human mother’s womb and at death would “return” to the figurative womb of mother earth (cf. Gen. 3:19; this commingling of a female womb and the earth also occurs in Ps. 139:13–15). There is little or nothing to support trying to read more into this literary figure than that. Compare the imagery of the earth as the womb from which the sea “burst out” in the creation context in Job 38:8, cited above.

The individual in each of these passages was in the womb, and came forth from the womb.

However, as Lundbom Freedman (and others) have claimed: “in theological contexts *mibbeṭen* has two meanings, ‘from within the womb’ (Job 1:21; Ps. 22:10 [9]) or ‘from birth’ (Judg. 13:5; Ps. 58:4 [3]; 71:6).”¹² Although this claim is generally accepted concerning *mibbeṭen*, I do not agree with all of Freedman’s examples. The challenge, of course, is knowing when *mibbeṭen* is intended to convey the sense of “from (within) the womb” and when it means “from birth,” and if this distinction even matters (I think it does).

One passage cited by Freedman and others to demonstrate that *mibbeṭen* can have the sense of “from birth” is Psalms 71:6:

“Upon you [YHWH] I have leaned from my birth [*mibbeṭen*;
“from the womb”];

it was you who took me from my mother’s womb [*mimmē’ēy
’immī*].”

The current translation practice is to render *mibbeṭen* in Psalms 71:6 as “from birth” (e.g., NRSV, NIV, NET), rather than more literally as “from the womb” (KJV). The point of these poetic lines is to figuratively represent someone’s trust in YHWH ever since they have been alive. However, this verse does not appear to be making a statement on whether pre-birth fetuses or post-birth infants have agency and choose to trust YHWH. Nor does it appear possible to tell from this verse, theologically speaking, whether or not the biblical author really intended to convey the possibility of trust “from (within) the womb.”¹³

Similarly, another passage in which *mibbeṭen* is often understood to mean “from birth,” is Psalms 58:3 (HB v. 4): “The wicked go astray from the womb [*mēreḥem*]; they err from their birth [*mibbeṭen*], speaking lies” (cf. Isa. 48:8, in which the “house of Jacob” is called “a transgressor from the womb” [KJV; *mibbeṭen*]). Presumptions that fetuses are not wicked and that they do not speak falsehood “from (within) the womb” can be claimed as support for the now common rendering of *mibbeṭen* (and

12 Lundbom Freedman, “*beṭen*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, rev. ed., ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. by John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 2:97.

13 Nor is this paper the place to thoroughly analyze the theological meaning of this or the verses that are cited next. However, given the biblical depiction of life beginning in the womb and the wording of Ps. 71:6, I see no biblical requirement to interpret *mibbeṭen* in 71:6a as “from birth” as opposed to “from (within) the womb.”

mēreḥem) in this verse as “from birth.”¹⁴ (Although newborns do not speak either!) Whether the “incurrigibility of the wicked” decried in this verse is more a literary figure or a theological given is open to debate.¹⁵ However, the parallel use of *mēreḥem* and *mibbeṭen* does nothing to help resolve the specific value and theological meaning of these expressions.

The challenge of interpreting the intent of these phrases raises questions about the timing of YHWH’s election of individuals “from the womb.” Realizing that *mibbeṭen* and *mēreḥem* can, depending on the passage (and on the translator), convey the sense of “from (within) the womb” or “from birth,” I will now review the election passages that contain *mibbeṭen* and *mēreḥem*, and analyze them to determine which of these two meanings seems most appropriate.

Election Passages with “from the womb”

Some biblical passages convey a form of divine foreknowledge and election, but do not include *mēreḥem* or *mibbeṭen* (“from the womb”), such as Genesis 25:23: “And the LORD said to her [Rebekah], ‘Two nations are in your womb [*bēbeṭen*], and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’”

Other passages, such as Isaiah 44:2 and 49:5, indicate that YHWH formed his chosen “servant” *mibbeṭen*, “from the womb,” which is usually now translated “in the womb” (e.g., NRSV, NET), since, as mentioned above, YHWH creates people *within* their mothers’ wombs, not just when they are coming forth at birth. The KJV translates Isaiah 44:2 and 49:5 literally, “formed you from the womb,” but this is awkward compared to the rendition of formed “in the womb.”¹⁶ However, the emphasis in Isaiah 44:2 and 49:5 is not on *where* the servant was chosen,

14 See similarly, Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II: 51–100* (Anchor Bible 17; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 56, 59 (“wayward from birth”); and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (Hermeneia 19b; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 78, 81 (“liars go astray from their birth”).

15 See Dahood, *Psalms II: 51–100*, 59, for the quotation. Although the topic of wickedness from the womb / from birth is not the focus of this paper, several other passages of scripture may be related to this concept, including the description of Cain as a “murderer from the beginning” (Ether 8:15). Perhaps somewhat related are the descriptions of Satan as a “liar from the beginning” (D&C 93:25) and as a “murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). Of course, the phrase “from the beginning” occurs in a variety of scripture passages with “beginning” having a variety of reference points. I thank an unnamed reviewer for mentioning these passages.

16 Isa. 44:24 similarly mentions YHWH creating his “servant” in the womb (*mibbeṭen*; cf. 44:21), but election is not emphasized in that verse.

only that YHWH created him (physically) *mibbeṭen*, so these passages add little to this discussion.

More to the point, Judges 13:3–5 recounts that, “the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman [Samson’s mother] and said to her...‘you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth [*min-habbēṭen*]. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines’.” As it often does, the NRSV renders, in this case *min-habbēṭen*, “from the womb,” as “from birth.” However, the NRSV of Judges 16:17 presents the adult Samson’s reference to his divine election with a different rendition of the phrase in question: “So he [Samson] told her [Delilah] his whole secret, and said to her, ‘...I have been a nazirite to God from my mother’s womb [*mibbeṭen*].’” This apparent inconsistency in translation highlights the question concerning the intent of these passages. Was Samson a nazirite “from (within) the womb” or only “from birth,” i.e., when his mother delivered him?

The well-known election passage in Isaiah 49:1 reads, “The LORD called me [Israel personified] before I was born [*mibbeṭen*, “from the womb”]; while I was in my mother’s womb [*mimmē’ēy ’immî*; “from the innards of my mother”] he named me.” By including the word “before” in its rendition, the NRSV of 49:1 conveys the sense that election took place before birth, while YHWH’s servant was still *in* the womb, but the Hebrew text does not include the word “before.”¹⁷ However, the NET rendition entirely avoids in-womb election in this verse: “The LORD summoned me from birth [*mibbeṭen*]; he commissioned me when my mother brought me [*mimmē’ēy ’immî*] into the world.”

The variance in these two modern translations of Isaiah 49:1 and the inconsistency between the NRSV renditions of Judges 13:5 and 16:17 highlight the ambiguous nature of the phrase *mibbeṭen*, “from the womb.” This situation raises questions about theological and other personal influences on translations and complicates the effort to confidently determine whether the Bible presents YHWH as choosing or electing people while they are alive “in the womb” or just from/at birth. Not surprisingly, the biblical form and ambiguity continues into the Greek New Testament, as found in Paul’s claim in Galatians 1:15: “But

17 The Hebrew form *bēṭerem*, “before,” does not occur in the verse, as it does in Jer. 1:5. The NRSV includes “before” here to clarify the sense of “in the womb” rather than “from birth.” The older KJV faithfully renders the Hebrew, but it does not provide an indication of how “from the womb” is understood: “The LORD hath called me from the womb [*mibbeṭen*]; from the bowels of my mother [*mimmē’ēy ’immî*] hath he made mention of my name.”

when God, who had set me apart before I was born [*ek koilias mētros mou*; “from my mother’s womb”]...” (NRSV, again adding “before” to indicate in-womb election). Alternatively, the NET renders the phrase in question as: “set me apart from birth,” thus avoiding in-womb election by their translation.

Thus, due to the nature of the Hebrew form *mibbeten*, Judges 13:5; 16:17; and Isaiah 49:1, in and of themselves, do not decisively clarify the timing of YHWH’s election, whether in the womb or when the child was actually delivered and thus became fully human, although I think the former option is more likely. However, the position that at least some Israelites accepted in-womb divine election is definitely supported by Jeremiah 1:5 (discussed below) and it finds contextualization in similar claims in certain non-Israelite election texts. Oft-cited examples include king Pi/Piye, who conquered much of Egypt ca. 730 BC and established the 25th Egyptian dynasty, and of whom it was claimed: “It is [the god] Amun Re who is speaking...to his beloved son, king Pi, ‘I said of you when you were still in your mother’s body, that you would be ruler of Egypt, for I already knew you in the seed, when you were still in the egg, that you would become Lord.’”¹⁸ And Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (556–539 BC) claimed he was one “whose fate [the gods] Sin and Ningal (while yet) in the womb of his mother had destined for dominion.”¹⁹

Returning to Jeremiah 1:5

As reviewed above, the Hebrew Bible is consistent in representing that YHWH creates people “in the womb,” but there are differing positions, expressed through different renditions of *mēreḥem* and *mibbeten*, on whether YHWH elects or chooses people while they exist *in* the womb, or merely at their birth. However, this latter ambiguity is eliminated in Jeremiah 1:5:

(1:5a) ‘Before [*bēterem*] I formed you in the womb [*babbeten*]
I knew you,

(5b) and before [*bēterem*] you were born [came forth from the
womb/*mēreḥem*] I consecrated you;

18 *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. Walter Beyerlin, trans. Hellmut Brunner (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 29.

19 Shalom M. Paul, “Deutero-Isaiah and Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1 (1968): 185. For several additional ancient Near Eastern examples of election, both in the womb and in a king’s youth, see Pike, “Before Jeremiah Was: Divine Election in the Ancient Near East,” 42–49.

(5c) I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Jeremiah 1:5b contains the phrase *mēreḥem*, but the Hebrew word *bēterem* explicitly indicates that Jeremiah was “consecrated” or sanctified before birth: “before [*bēterem*] you came forth from the womb [*mēreḥem*].” This supports, or at least allows for, the plausibility of understanding the intent of in-womb election in Judges 13:5; 16:17; and Isaiah 49:1 (as well as Gal. 1:15). The fact that *mibbeten* is used in those verses instead of *mēreḥem* seems to have no bearing on the interpretation of “from the womb.” However, given the ambiguity of the sense intended by *mibbeten* in these other passages, and given that we have no biblical discussion of the concept, it is difficult to know for sure whether or not all Israelites at all times shared a broad-based, common view of the concept of in-womb election (as explicitly evidenced by Jer. 1:5).

Although it is not the primary purpose of this paper to analyze all the components of Jeremiah 1:5, a few comments are in order on the words “knew” (5a), “consecrated” (5b), and “appointed” (5c). The Hebrew lexical root *yd’*, “to know,” conveys a variety of related meanings in Hebrew, including to have awareness and understanding of something or someone (e.g., Judg. 13:21; Job 37:16), to know someone sexually through intercourse (Gen. 4:1; Num. 31:17), and to be aware of and care for someone (e.g., Gen. 18:19; 2 Sam. 7:20). I agree with commentators who view the sense of *yd’* in Jeremiah 1:5 as similar to its use in Amos 3:2, where YHWH says to Israelites, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.” Divine election and covenant were the combined basis for YHWH’s unique knowing of collective Israel. We should likewise understand this meaning of *yd’* in Jeremiah 1:5: YHWH was not *just* aware of or acquainted with Jeremiah, but “knew” him in a relationship and chose him before he was conceived.²⁰

The words “consecrated” (5b) and “appointed” (5c) further emphasize Jeremiah’s status in his prophetic role. “Consecrated” or “sanctified” (KJV) translates the Hebrew verbal form *hiqdiš*, to set people or things apart from common or profane use, to dedicate them to God and his use. “Appointed” or “ordained” (KJV) translates the Hebrew lexical root *ntn*, “to give,” which by extension here means to place upon or to create

20 As Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 231, has observed, “There has been a tendency to interpret the present usage [in Jer. 1:5] of *yd’* so as to make it synonymous with *bhr*, “to choose,” i.e., ‘I knew you’ = ‘I chose you.’” And as William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 33, has claimed, “‘Know’ here [in Jer. 1:5] then implies both intimacy and covenantal bond.”

an opportunity for someone. Essentially, this passage declares that once YHWH “knew” or chose Jeremiah, he then gave him a prophetic assignment in which he was dedicated or set apart to represent YHWH.²¹

The second question I am exploring in this paper is, how does Jeremiah’s election in the womb (1:5b+c) relate to the concept in 1:5a, that YHWH “knew” Jeremiah *before* he was “formed in the womb”? Variations on two possible options have been proposed for understanding the relationship between Jeremiah 1:5a and 5b+c. One approach has been to view 5a and 5b+c as essentially saying the same thing. Some scholars suggest that YHWH knew and called Jeremiah before Jeremiah was born and stop there, blurring into one pre-birth package any time differential between pre-conception and in-utero. For example, in commenting on Jeremiah 1:5 the *New Bible Commentary* simply claims, “The Lord...knew and appointed him [Jeremiah] before he was born.”²² “Appointed,” of course, is something YHWH did when Jeremiah was in the womb (1:5b+c). But 1:5a claims YHWH “knew” Jeremiah before he was even conceived.

Interestingly, a variation on this approach occurs when some Latter-day Saints blur the distinction of time and place in Jeremiah 1:5a and 5b+c, but in a different way. Latter-day Saints accept as doctrine the premortal existence of all humans as spirit children of God the Father. They further believe these premortal spirit beings were chosen or foreordained during their premortal existence to opportunities and responsibilities in this mortal life.²³

Latter-day Saints regularly use Jeremiah 1:5 to support this doctrine. For example, Ellis Rasmussen claimed that, “this passage is one of the few clear revelations about foreordination in the scriptures. It tells of Jeremiah’s being sanctified for special service and ordained to be a prophet in his premortal life—...for it happened before his body was

21 As mentioned above, I am not dealing with the issue of agency in this study.

22 Gordon McConville, “Jeremiah,” in *New Bible Commentary*, 21st Century ed. ed. Gordon J. Wenham, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994), 674. Similarly, Allen, *Jeremiah*, 25, provides an assessment of Jeremiah’s call—“divine planning that antedated his conception and birth....Long ago a decision had been made, to set Jeremiah aside to belong to God”—that contains no delineation of time, either pre-conception or in-womb.

23 See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World—The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 102; and Gayle O. Brown, “Premortal Life,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1123–25.

even formed.”²⁴ In actuality, Jeremiah 1:5 says Jeremiah was “sanctified” (KJV) or “consecrated” while he was *in the womb*, not before he was conceived. In this case, I presume a Latter-day Saint belief in premortal election coupled with a desire to support and emphasize the doctrine of premortality has prompted Rasmussen, and other Latter-day Saints who have similarly commented on this verse, to simply ignore the second, in-utero phase mentioned in 1:5b+c, which itself aligns closely with other biblical passages, mentioned above, that contain claims of in-womb election.²⁵ But the outcome is the same; the two stages represented in Jeremiah 1:5—pre-conception and in-womb—are essentially and erroneously blurred into one. I know of no Latter-day Saint Church authority who has claimed that the phrase “from (within) the womb” is a biblical idiom or metaphor that really means *before conception*. And there is currently no evidence, scriptural or otherwise, to substantiate such a claim.²⁶

Despite the claims of some Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint commentators, and given the regularity of the portrayal of the concepts that YHWH creates people in the womb and chooses people *mēreḥem* and *mibbeten*, “from (within) the womb,” it is difficult to assume, based on the received canon of the Hebrew Bible, that ancient Israelites understood Jeremiah 1:5a and 5b+c as synonymous. A *biblically-based* rendition of this verse requires two separate activities at two chronologically distinct stages of Jeremiah’s existence: (1) YHWH “knew” Jeremiah *before* he created Jeremiah in the womb (1:5a),²⁷ and (2) YHWH “consecrated” and “appointed” Jeremiah when he was *in* the womb (1:5b+c).

24 Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1993), 541.

25 See also Monte S. Nyman, *The Words of Jeremiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 16, who states, “this verse substantiates the doctrines of premortal life and foreordination of the prophets,” but mentions nothing about Jeremiah being consecrated and appointed in his mother’s womb; and Kerry Muhlestein, *The Essential Old Testament Companion* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 2013), 427, who notes that Jer. 1 teaches us about being known to and ordained by God “before the world was created,” but again, Jer. 1:5 says he was “ordained” (KJV) or “appointed” “from (within) the womb.”

26 Furthermore, while it might seem preferable to some Latter-day Saints to postulate that election “from (within) the womb” is merely a biblical metaphor or figure of speech for true premortal election, this can only remain speculation; there is nothing substantive in the Bible or elsewhere that supports such an assumption. I have tried in this study to work with the text of the Bible as we have received it.

27 And, from a Latter-day Saint view, this premortal phase could and did include divine appointing or foreordination.

Thus, treating the content of Jeremiah 1:5a and 5b+c as representing two separate phases of Jeremiah's existence and as two separate, but related, actions on YHWH's part is the other major interpretive option of dealing with these two portions of Jeremiah 1:5. Recognizing this biblical distinction may strike Latter-day Saints as odd, but it does allow for clearly asserting a premortal component to Jeremiah's existence, rather than merely seeing everything pre-birth as one fuzzily undefined phase. And it seems to make better sense of other biblical passages that place election in the womb.

Some non-Latter-day Saint scholars do note a difference in 1:5 between the pre-conception and in-utero stages. But they say nothing substantial about it, presumably because they do not accept the concept of premortality. They thus treat these claims, especially that YHWH "knew" Jeremiah before Jeremiah was conceived, as creative hyperbole.²⁸

Of course, understanding the distinction between these two phases — preconception and in-womb — as explicitly mentioned in Jeremiah 1:5 raises the question of what is intended by it. Although we cannot be sure, since there is nothing else like this in the Hebrew Bible, my presumption as a Latter-day Saint is that there are two distinct phases of existence mentioned in Jeremiah 1:5, and that the consecrating and appointing associated with the second, in-womb phase (1:5b+c) may be understood in its biblical context as a reaffirmation and even an extension of the "knowing" that occurred previously during the pre-conception phase (1:5a), now that Jeremiah was an "observable" life-form in his mother's womb. (If the actions in the two phases are completely different and distinct, we cannot currently explain the difference²⁹). This claim is viable since biblical "knowing" can convey a sense of relationship, and even choosing and covenanting with someone (see Amos 3:2, mentioned above).

In reality, we do not know what the biblically depicted in-womb consecrating and appointing was thought by Israelites to involve, nor do we know for sure why multiple biblical passages place such appointing *in* the womb, as opposed to before conception or after birth. It is no wonder that some commentators have bundled the preconception and

28 See for example, Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 135, 230–31, 236; and Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM, 1981), 45.

29 In-womb divine appointing is not a doctrinal issue discussed by Latter-day Saints. Furthermore, the biblical evidence is sufficiently meager that we do not know if (some/all) Israelites believed that in-womb election was the norm for all people, or only for certain representatives of YHWH.

in-womb actions mentioned in Jeremiah 1:5 into just one phase of activity. However, *if* in-womb appointing is merely a biblical metaphor for premortal choosing, as some Latter-day Saints might assume, then why the distinction in Jeremiah 1:5 between preconception knowing and in-the-womb consecrating and appointing? The Bible presents in-womb divine election as a reality, but does little to aid our understanding of this phenomenon.³⁰

Conclusion

Jeremiah 1:5 remains a theologically significant verse. We cannot easily dismiss the two separate phases or stages of Jeremiah's existence and calling represented in Jeremiah 1:5 as a poorly preserved biblical text, as an idiom, or by simply ignoring them. Beyond what Jeremiah 1:5a conveys with the declaration that YHWH "knew" Jeremiah before he was conceived, the biblical text declares that YHWH created Jeremiah in the womb, and that *after* Jeremiah was conceived—*after* he became a viable and recognizable human life-form in his mother's womb—he was, *according to the Israelite perspective preserved in the Bible*, "appointed" to become a prophet of YHWH. I think there is no avoiding this plain sense of the verse, although what the theological implications are is open to question. Thus, Jeremiah 1:5, in its biblical context, is best understood as attesting to *two* pre-birth phases of Jeremiah's existence. It also witnesses to an Israelite understanding of two phases of pre-birth election, that which occurred before conception and additionally that which occurred post-conception but in the womb. Although this raises questions we cannot currently answer, such queries in no way annul

30 A very helpful, unnamed reviewer brought to my attention the original reading of the text of what became D&C 84:28 and wondered about a possible connection between its content and the topic of this paper: "until John whom God raised up being fillid with the holy ghost from his Mothers womb, for he was baptised while he was yet in his mothers womb and was ordained by the Angel of God at the time he was eight days old unto this power." I note this passage here, but leave the matter to qualified Church historians to assess it. "Revelation, 22–23 September 1832 [D&C 84]," The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-22-23-september-1832-dc-84/1>. Note 17 at that page states, "In preparation for the publication of this revelation in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, JS crossed out 'the womb' in the Revelation Book 2 manuscript and inserted 'his Childhood.'" All published versions read 'baptized while he was yet in his childhood.' (Revelation Book 2, p. 23; [originally printed as] D&C 4:4, 1835 ed.)."

the biblical depiction, nor diminish the Latter-day Saint perspective on Jeremiah's premortal existence.³¹

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