Formed in and Called from the Womb

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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.

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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 [babbetên] I knew you,
(5b) and before you were born [came forth from the womb/mērehem] 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/mērehem] 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

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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.


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, beten and rehem, are often rendered “womb” in English translations of the Bible. The term beten, designates “innards, belly.” A passage in which beten 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 [beten]” (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 [beten] of Sheol I cried” (see also, Job 38:29). An example of a passage in which the noun beten 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 [beten]” (see also, Gen. 38:27; Eccles. 11:5).

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

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5 As indicated in most Hebrew lexica, the relationship between the noun rehem and the verbal root rḥm, usually translated “to have mercy, to love,” is not entirely clear. The latter is generally considered to be denominative.
Several biblical passages contain beten and rehem 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 [rehem]: thou art my God from my mother’s belly [beten].” Other terms that refer generally to a person’s inner torso and sometimes occur in parallel with rehem or beten are kilyōt and mēʾim.

Three important points of biblical theology are evident in connection with the use of beten and rehem. 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 [beten].” And Job rhetorically asks: “Did not he [God] who made me in the womb [beten] make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb [rehem]?” (Job 31:15; see also, Isa. 44:2, 24). 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. 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.”

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,” rehem], and from the womb [beten] 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 [minni-beten], carried from the womb [minni-rehem].”
The prepositions and verbs used with beten and rehem 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 rehem and/or beten.

The Phrase “from the womb”

Of the biblical passages containing babbetên or bârehem, “in the womb,” only Jeremiah 1:5 involves divine election, utilizing as it does both babbetên and mērehem. Election passages that mention the womb typically employ the forms mērehem and especially mibbetên, “from the womb.” (In the Hebrew Bible, the final letter, n, in the preposition min, “from,” often assimilates to the following consonant, which is then doubled [mibbetên] or causes compensatory lengthening of the vowel [mērehem].) 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 mērehem and mibbetên 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 [mibbetên].’”

Jeremiah 20:18: “Why did I come forth from the womb [mērehem] 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 proposition 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 mibbet en 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).” Although this claim is generally accepted concerning mibbet en, I do not agree with all of Freedman’s examples. The challenge, of course, is knowing when mibbet en 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 mibbet en can have the sense of “from birth” is Psalms 71:6:

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

it was you who took me from my mother’s womb [mimmê ’êy ‘immî].”

The current translation practice is to render mibbet en 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.”

Similarly, another passage in which mibbet en is often understood to mean “from birth,” is Psalms 58:3 (HB v. 4): “The wicked go astray from the womb [mêrehem]; they err from their birth [mibbet en], speaking lies” (cf. Isa. 48:8, in which the “house of Jacob” is called “a transgressor from the womb” [KJV; mibbet en]). 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 mibbet en (and

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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 mibbet en in 71:6a as “from birth” as opposed to “from (within) the womb.”
mēre hem) in this verse as “from birth.”14 (Although newborns do not speak either!) Whether the “incorrigibility 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 mēre hem and mibbeten 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 mibbeten and mēre hem 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 mibbeten and mēre hem, 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 mēre hem or mibbeten (“from the womb”), such as Genesis 25:23: “And the LORD said to her [Rebekah], ‘Two nations are in your womb [bēbeten], 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” mibbeten, “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,
only that YHWH created him (physically) *mibbeten*, 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-habbetēn*]. 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-habbetēn*, “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 [*mibbetēn*].’” 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 [*mibbetēn*, “from the womb”]; while I was in my mother’s womb [*mimmĕʿēy ḫimmî*; “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.” However, the NET rendition entirely avoids in-womb election in this verse: “The LORD summoned me from birth [*mibbetēn*]; he commissioned me when my mother brought me [*mimmĕʿēy ḫimmî*] 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 *mibbetēn*, “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

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17 The Hebrew form *bĕterem*, “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 [*mibbetēn*]; from the bowels of my mother [*mimmĕʿēy ḫimmî*] 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 mērehem 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 [bêterem] I formed you in the womb [babbeten] I knew you,

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

Jeremiah 1:5b contains the phrase mēreḥem, but the Hebrew word bĕterem explicitly indicates that Jeremiah was “consecrated” or sanctified before birth: “before [bĕterem] 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 mibbeṭen 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 mibbeṭen 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 ydʿ, “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 ydʿ 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 ydʿ 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 hiqdis, 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 ydʿ 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.
even formed.”

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. 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.

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 mērehem 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), 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 covenancing 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

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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.  

**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

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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.\textsuperscript{31}

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