Jeremiah 1:1-10

1. Finding the Text

I selected Jeremiah 1:1-10, due to a particular interest in prophetic works. The full passage is included at the end of this analysis, for quick referencing.

2. Surveying the text — first impressions

This passage (Jeremiah 1:1-10) contains the first ten verses of the book that describes the 40-year career of the prophet Jeremiah. These opening verses start in the third person to give historical context; the narrative then switches to the first person as Jeremiah tells his own story of being called as God's prophet.

3. Context — the wider picture

Like many called to great things, Jeremiah firsts rejects the call, making excuses as to his unworthiness,[1] but God persists, and Jeremiah's resistance gives way to acceptance. God then touches his lips to show him he will speak God's words, not his own. This lip-touching is an echo of an earlier story: the prophet Isaiah's call, where God's angel touches his mouth with a burning coal.[2] Both prophets are tasked with turning the hearts and minds of the people back to God, as they dramatically fall away through intermarriage and the worship of local gods. Jeremiah is specifically asked to uproot, tear down, destroy and overthrow before finally being asked to build and plant, a narrative that essentially predicts the next 100 years of Judah's journey, away from God and homeland, returning after seventy years to rebuild the temple and resow the fields.

4. Form/Genre

The Book of Jeremiah is both history and prophetic literature. It is written largely as prose, with some poetic verse included, namely in the form of prayer, confession, prophesy or the voice of God talking to His prophet. The book tells the story of the 40-year career of the prophet Jeremiah who prophesied during the reign of King Josiah and later his sons Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, during the years leading up to, and into Jerusalem's capture and exile to Babylon.

5. Structure and movement

These verses are structured thus:

A. Historical context (written in the third person) verses 1-3

B. The calling by God of Jeremiah (written in the first person) verses 4-10

Section B is structured as a dialog:

i) God asks — vs 4-5

ii) Jeremiah rejects — v 6

iii) God asks again, more forcefully — vs 7-8

iv) God takes action (touches the prophet's mouth) thus forming a covenant — v 9

v) God gives specify direction — v 10

vi) Jeremiah (reluctantly) accepts the mission — implied, not explicit

Verse 5 is written in verse, a beautiful love poem about how He know Jeremiah before he was born, and had him marked even then as a prophet.

The phrase "the word" opens three of the ten verses (verses 1,2 and 4) each referring to God's word. Then in verse 9 we read *"I have put my words in your mouth"* informing us that it is the Word that is all-powerful, the Word that carries the message. For Christians this is a prelude[3] to the opening sentence of the gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." God touching Jeremiah's lips is a transfer of the Word, indicating movement and the carrying, or carrying out, of something important.

6. Digging deeper — detailed analysis

Specificity

In the historical overview (verses 1-3) the writer is being very specific; almost exact dates are given as to the start and end points of Jeremiah's mission, clearly referencing the kings ruling at the time. It is helpful to know that Josiah was an honourable God-fearing king, who cared greatly for his people, but his sons who reigned after him were the complete opposite. This immediately paints a picture of the time, and of the support and difficulties Jeremiah encounters during his ministry..

Relationship

The second part (verses 4-10) is written as a conversation between God and Jeremiah. This is in the tradition of the earlier stories, e.g. God conversing with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and to a lesser extent Joshua. The God of Israel is a relational God, not a commanding God. He engages in dialogue, even listening to the advice of his own prophets.[4] God models relationship such as He'd like us to have with one another.

Poetry

Verse 5 takes the form of (in English) a three-line poem. The predominant verb in each line tells a story of creation: *form*, *set apart, appoint*. "I *formed* you, I *set* you *apart*, I *appointed* you. Not only was God responsible for the formation of Jeremiah as a human, a person, he also planned his future course in life as a prophet. A fourth verb, *to know*, also appears in line one: Before I formed you in the womb *I knew you*. God's knowledge of the human is eternal, existing before the human is even formed. This short poem takes us right back to the creation story itself, reminding Jeremiah (and the reader) the great glory of God's omnipresence.

Inadequacy

"Alas, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am too young" replies Jeremiah, echoing Moses's resistance to his calling in the book of Exodus: "I have never been eloquent…I am slow of speech and tongue." While Moses claims a speech impediment, Jeremiah resorts to his youth as being a reason to balk, but in both cases it is the Word that they are afraid of—and with good reason. Being a mouthpiece for God, especially in times of deep trouble is surely one of the most daunting tasks ever undertaken, outdoing even the trials of Hercules. No wonder these men back away.

7. The big picture — finding the centre

These few verses describe a calling. Jeremiah's calling, as with each of the other prophets, is front and centre of their whole story. That these individuals are called by God matters greatly—they are not acting for the benefit of self. By using the structure off call-refuse-call again-accept it is made clear that the prophet is doing this work against their better judgment, therefore putting their trust in the Lord, and carrying out His will, not their own. To express this in a single sentence:

The prophet is a reluctant—not a willing—mouthpiece to convey God's message, making clear to us that this must be God's work, not the work of an individual human.

8. Secondary literature

My analysis here is informed by reading different versions of the Bible,[5] and also reading David Guzik's Enduring Word commentary.[6] I was influenced by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' description of Jeremiah as being a "prophet of hope".[7] We can too easily think of the OT prophets as "prophets of doom" missing out that they usually have a balance of warning and promise. Sacks quotes Jeremiah 31:15-16 as evidence.[8]

9. So what? Applying the text today

These verses remind us that life is full of challenges. There are many tasks I am asked to undertake that seem daunting, or just plain dull. I balk. I look for excuses. I procrastinate. Remembering firstly that I am not alone in this response, that greater men than I balk too, and then secondly recognising that in all that I do God walks beside me, guiding me, knowing my fear, my boredom, but loving me anyway, and giving me the courage and care to continue, I am lifted and encouraged to do what I do in service to God.

—

1,246 words

Jeremiah 1:1-10

1 The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. 2 The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, 3 and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.

The Call of Jeremiah

4 The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

6 "Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."

7 But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.

9 Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." (NIV)

—

End Notes

---

1 Many prophets and judges, e.g. Moses, Jonah,, Gideon, Barak, and other heroes of story and myth, e.g. Odysseus, Luke Skywalker, Frodo Baggins begin their quests by refusing the call, most commonly through a sense of inadequacy, but also (as in the case of Jonah) through fear or uncertainty of the cause.

2 Isaiah 6:4-8

3 Well, one of many preludes we can find in the Old Testament writings

4 For example, the conversation between Abraham and God about Sodom, Genesis 18:22-33

5 Specifically NIV, KJV, NRSV, GNT

6 https://enduringword.com/

7 https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/masei/leadership-at-time-of-crisis/

8 This is what the Lord says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," says the Lord. "They will return from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your descendants," says the Lord. "Your children will return to their land."