

Jeremiah 1:5: Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb, I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.

Psalms 139:15: My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.

Psalms 139:15 poetically compares a mother's womb to "the lowest parts of the earth." This is not to be compared with Hell but rather with the idea of having been conceived "in secret." Ancients understood the physical mechanics of procreation, of course, but the how and the when of "flesh being ensouled" remained for them, as for us, veiled in mystery. We believers can say how this is accomplished – By way of God's grace. We can say when this is accomplished – At the moment of conception. Nevertheless, when we speak of God's action at a certain place and time, what we are really describing is a coming together of God's eternity with the created world, a touching of the two similar in conception to Michelangelo's painting of God's finger approaching Adam's. It is not just the nearness of God to Adam that matters. It is that God is the One approaching Adam, not the other way around, and so we see in the creation of man (and in the creation of every child inside a mother's womb) the act of God coming to the child to make Himself knowable to him or her. Until our eyes are opened in faith, much like the eyes of the unborn opening when born, this relationship is shrouded in mystery. Hence, the child is "made in secret." The child is conceived in secret not because of any shame in conception but because of the impenetrability of God who, nevertheless, breaks through His own impenetrability to make Himself knowable to every boy or girl in the womb. So, the crux of human conception is God coming to man, a kind of Incarnation, which means that the Incarnation of God in Christ Jesus is as much a totally natural occurrence as it is supernatural. Why? *For the natural is supernatural.* That is the great mystery: The divide between natural and supernatural is an artificial construct of our own fallen minds. In reality, the

natural is not divorced from God and His outreach to us. The natural is possible only because of God and His outreach to us. This happens at the moment of conception for every child. Thus, the conception of a child is always holy, and so the child so conceived is intended by God to be holy. The child is not holy at conception because of Original Sin, which is to say, because Adam's first sin has perverted the created order from God's will. Nevertheless, God wants for the child – and, by extension, all of creation – to be holy at conception and forever thereafter, and so God will set forth the means of man's salvation in Christ Jesus, not only for the good of man, but also for God to fulfill His own will. Notice the reference to the child being "curiously wrought." This is better translated from the original Hebrew as one being "skillfully wrought, as when intricately woven, embroidered, or fashioned with a needle." This calls to mind Psalms 139:13: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my

mother's womb." God ensouls the child's flesh with a careful and loving hand. God is an artist. Every act of human conception is a work of divine art as much as craft: Unique, breathtaking, with an eye for sublime detail, for God the Artist always sees Himself in what He creates. Why? Not because God needs to see Himself in man, but rather because man must be able to glimpse God in himself to try to reach back to God as much as God has been reaching out to him. Man must be able to know the spark of the divine in himself to be able to know God. With his mind perverted by sin, man's conception of the spark of the divine in himself is confused with the false idea of *himself being divine*. Man's dream of self-divination is the cause of much evil in the world, but God is willing for this false dream to be fancied because the alternative is much worse – namely, a man forever blind to the divine spark in himself and so incapable of knowing God. Man perverting his relationship with God is better than man having no capacity for a relationship with God. Perversion of love is better than incapacity to love, and so every act of human conception includes the mysterious element of God's artistry and love at play. Every act of human conception results in a person capable of knowing God at least at some level. Knowing is interwoven with loving, so every act of human conception results in a person capable of loving God at least at some level. Where that person's knowing/loving fall short, God bridges the divide in Christ Jesus as foreshadowed by God reaching out to man before man even is inclined to try to reach back to God.

With Psalm 139:15 in mind, we can better understand Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed thee in the belly" refers to God's eternal mind. Jeremiah is known to God before there even is a Jeremiah so conceived in his mother's womb. As we discussed when considering Boethius, this is not a proof of predestination. Recapping Boethius, God is not bound by space/time. He can and does interact with space/time for His own providential purposes, but He is not bound by it as we are (recalling how the Resurrected Christ Jesus is in a glorified body that can be seen, heard, touched, etc., thus occupying space/time in a defined manner as we do, and yet the Resurrected Christ Jesus appears and disappears in a way we cannot do, thus showing He is not bound by space/time). God has no foreknowledge, technically speaking, for He is not in chronological space/time. Rather, Boethius explains, God sees the fullness of our chronological space/time as one eternal present. With this in mind, we can see how it is that God has eternal omniscience, and we have free will. For divine foreknowledge would imply predestination, which robs man of his free will, but eternally present knowledge is not foreknowledge and thus does not imply predestination. Returning to Jeremiah 1:5, God's eternal knowledge of (and love for) Jeremiah speaks to how Jeremiah is picked to be an instrument of God's will. Jeremiah is *a chosen one*. What is he chosen to do? To be a prophet unto the nations. Jeremiah is exalted not because of who he is, but because God has chosen him.

Ephesians 1:4: *According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.*

Jeremiah is *a chosen one*, but so is every person ever conceived. God chooses all of us *before the foundation of the world*. What does he choose every person ever conceived to be? Holy, without blame, and before Him in love. Does this mean that every man will fulfill God's choice for him? No. For

there is free will, and many will choose to be something other than what God has chosen for them to be. Because so many people will fall away from God's choice, from our perspective we can say that *"many are called, but few are chosen"* (Matthew 22:14). From God's view, we can say that "all are called, but only one is *the chosen*, which is Christ Jesus, and we *are chosen too* in and through His intercession for us, if we give ourselves over to Him." The difference in perspectives is attributed to this: God sees clearly; we see through a glass, darkly. God sees the fullness of events in one eternal present; we see partially in chronological time. What is critical

here is that as much as Jeremiah is exalted in this verse, he is in substance like all of us. We too are exalted in being set aside at conception for God's will in a way that is peculiar to every one of us. Far from denying Jeremiah's exalted status, this realization places his prophecy squarely in the context of our common human condition. Jeremiah is chosen in God's eternal mind, but he is sanctified, which is to say, blessed for the purpose for which he has been conceived, inside of his mother's womb. Jeremiah is blessed in and through his natural state. Every mother's womb is an ordained tabernacle for God's supernatural blessings. What is conceived in God's eternal mind is fashioned and blessed for man in nature, thus the coming together of natural and supernatural for every human person inside the mother's womb. We saw this womb-like metaphor in Genesis 1:2 (*"And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"*). As we discussed earlier, the Spirit of God that moves upon the face of the waters is like a mother's womb hovering protectively over the waters not yet ordered. We see this same metaphor in Matthew 23:37 (*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets...how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not"*). God works inside a mother's womb, and He works protectively over the fallen world as if it is a mother's womb, albeit one that is not working as it should because of the perversion of that womb from sin.

Ephesians 1:11: *In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.*

God ordained Jeremiah to be a prophet unto the nations. This is the third divine act in succession after conceiving Jeremiah in His eternal mind and sanctifying Jeremiah in his mother's womb. It is no coincidence that we see the same three successions in creation, as we discussed earlier: The creation of the universe is creation/salvation/revelation, all in one, from God's perspective. Here, we speak of conception/creation, then sanctifying/salvation, and then ordination/revelation. The first two sets are obvious. Ordination is related to Revelation in the case of Jeremiah if we recall that he is ordained to be *a prophet unto the nations*, that is to reveal the Prophetic Word unto the ends of the earth. Thus, we should view Jeremiah's conception as akin to creation in Genesis: It is an ordering of a life for a select purpose, a sanctifying of that life so that it can pursue that one

purpose in the world, and a setting aside of that life so that the life may be identified intrinsically with the purpose. That a life is identified intrinsically with a divine purpose tells us that each life is meant to

be lived as a vocation unto God. Just as the ordered universe is meant to proceed as it is in space/time as a vocation unto God (see Psalm 19:1: *"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork"*), so every life is meant to proceed as a vocation unto God. This is important, for as much as we speak of every human life as made in God's image, so we must speak of every human life as also caught up in the created order over which God selects man to exercise dominion. Man is made for a relationship with God, but he is also set aside for a relationship with nature – not a relationship of equality, but rather one where man is intended to exercise dominion over nature for the pursuit of God's will. God makes man, but then God puts man in Eden. God conceives of Jeremiah, but then God sanctifies Jeremiah in the womb (so God fashions Adam from dust and breathes His life into Adam's nostrils) and finally sets him out into the world to exercise prophetic authority (so God puts Adam into Eden and gives him dominion over it for the purpose of further ordering Eden into ever greater harmony with God's will).

Ellicott's Commentary:

I knew thee. — With the force which the word often has in Hebrew, as implying. not foreknowledge only, but choice and approval (Psalm 1:6; Psalm 37:18, Amos 3:2).

I sanctified thee. — i.e., consecrated thee, set thee apart as hallowed for this special use.

Ordained. — Better, I have appointed, without the conjunction, this verb referring to the manifestation in time of the eternal purpose.

Unto the nations. — i.e., to the outlying Gentile nations. This was the distinguishing characteristic of Jeremiah's work. Other prophets were sent to Israel and Judah, with occasional parentheses of prophecies that affected the Gentiles. The horizon of Jeremiah was to extend more widely. In part, his work was to make them drink the cup of the Lord's fury (Jeremiah 25:15-17); but in part also he was a witness to them of a brighter future (Jeremiah

48:47; Jeremiah 49:39). It is as though he had drunk in the Spirit of Isaiah and thought of the true prophet as one who was to be a light of the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6).

St. Ambrose of Milan on Jeremiah 1:5:

Just as the spiritual bosom of the Father is understood as a certain inner secret of paternal love and nature, in which the Son is always present, so also the spiritual bosom of the Father is the womb, the secret of the innermost mystery, from which the Son has proceeded as though from a generative womb. Finally, we read in diverse ways, sometimes the womb of the Father, sometimes his heart from which he uttered a word, sometimes his mouth from which justice proceeded, from which wisdom came forth, as he himself says: 'From the mouth of the Most High, I came forth.' (Sirach 24:5) Thus, just as we understand that generation from the Father, let us also understand the generation of Mary, the mother, when the womb of the mother is blessed, certainly the virginal womb of Mary, who gave birth to the

Lord Jesus for us. Concerning which the Father says through the prophet Jeremiah: Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; and before you came forth from the womb, I sanctified you (Jer. 1, 5). Therefore, the prophet declared the dual substance in Christ, of divinity and flesh: one from the Father, the other from the Virgin; in such a way, however, that he did not lack his divinity when he was born of the Virgin and was in the body.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem on Jeremiah 1:5:

He is not ashamed to assume flesh, who is the creator of those very parts. Who tells us this? The Lord said to Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you. Before you came forth out of the womb, I made you holy." If, then, in making humanity he was not ashamed of the contact, was he ashamed in making for his own sake the holy flesh, the veil of his Godhead? It is God who even now creates children in the womb, as it is written in Job, "Didn't you pour me out as milk and curdled me like cheese? You have clothed me with skin and flesh and have knit me

together with bones and sinews." There is nothing polluted in the human frame unless a person defiles it with fornication and adultery. God, who made Adam, also made Eve. Both male and female were formed by God's hands. None of the parts of the body as formed from the beginning are polluted.

St. Theodoret of Cyrus on Jeremiah 1:5:

God's choice of Jeremiah was not without basis: knowledge preceded it. Notice it says that God had knowledge and then he consecrated, for he knows everything before it happens. Now, he employed the word consecrated, meaning "he appointed." Then God also mentions the task for which he selected him: "I appointed you as prophet to the nations." Thus, he prophesies not only concerning the fortunes of the Jews but also the other nations. "I replied, O Lord and Master that you are, see, I do not know how to speak, because I am a child." The prophet recognized the one addressing him. This is why he called him by a title having to do with lordship. When the mighty Moses was once speaking, remember, and wanted to learn the divine name, the Lord said, "I am the one who is." He imitates Moses' timidity, saying youth is not up to prophesying. The Lord, however, urges him not to put forward the excuse of youthfulness but to do as told.