A problem which Jeremiah shared with all the prophets was that of attracting the audience's attention. Perhaps for Jeremiah this problem was more severe; at least, in Jeremiah's book we have more record of conflicts with the crowds and even of plots to kill the prophet.

How did Jeremiah convince the audience to listen? At its roots, the issue is one of authority: not the source or nature of Jeremiah's authority to speak, but Jeremiah's techniques for persuading the audience of that authority. How did Jeremiah communicate the legitimacy of his prophetic authority, so that the audience willingly (to some degree) accepted his speaking? How was this legitimation accomplished, and in what texts might this function and intention be located?

The question of a text's function or intention calls into consideration form-critical analysis. The concern lies chiefly with the intention of the unit. Why did the prophet utter this? What is its purpose? What response was expected from the audience? Though many texts have a variety of intentions, the chief purpose of some units seems to be to present the credentials of the prophet or to argue, perhaps indirectly, for the audience's attention. Such speeches intend to make the audience listen to the prophet, and such speech can be called legitimation.

On one level, much speaking is legitimation. Everything that is said must do something to claim the audience's attention. In common speech, this is accomplished through a variety of means, both verbal and non-verbal. Speakers use a wide range of rhetorical and
oratorical devices in order to keep the attention of their audiences. The motivation to listen must be constantly presented and represented.

Though this need for legitimation pervades much speech, the present concern is more limited. In the book of Jeremiah, attempts to win the approval of the audience are visible. At several points, Jeremiah gives unusual speeches to gain the audience’s approval and support. The book contains a presentation of Jeremiah’s credentials in the call narrative. Jeremiah argues the validity of those credentials with Yahweh in the confessions. The authority to prophesy is argued between Jeremiah and other prophets. Jeremiah is given peculiar tasks which support his claims to authority. In these specific ways, Jeremiah struggles for the sympathetic listening of his audience. Five examples of legitimating texts will be examined below: i 4-19, xiv 10-16, xvi 1-9, xx 7-13, and xxiii 9-40.

I. Jer. i 4-19

One of the chief functions of a prophet’s call narrative is to announce the prophet’s credentials. The form itself may have originated in the setting of ambassadors presenting their credentials before their audience, telling how the ambassador was commissioned to present this particular message. The form was later used by prophets to publicly announce that they had been vested with legitimate authority and sent to proclaim a legitimate message. This public proclamation of the qualifications for prophecy is a process of legitimation. The prophet relating the call narrative is claiming legitimate authority to engage in the prophetic act, and the form of proclamation is intended to claim the authority in such a way that the claim is accepted by the audience.

The call narrative provides legitimation in two specific ways. First, the narrative claims that God is responsible for the prophesying. God called the prophet (i 5), and it is God who is responsible for the speaker and for the message (i 9-10). The prophet is shown to be exercising legitimate authority, received from God, to proclaim the specific message. Both the speaker and the speech are pronounced legitimate because of divine authority.