

April 5, Easter 1A (Jeremiah 31:1–6; Matthew 28:1–10)

In six short verses, Jeremiah makes sermon illustrations of three different exile stories.

by [Lisa M. Wolfe](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue
Published on March 30, 2026

This passage from Jeremiah uses theological poetry to highlight how God has provided for ancient Israel's survival. It invokes three exile stories: the time of enslavement in Egypt, resolved by exodus into the wilderness; the fall and exile of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 BCE; and the Babylonian exile of 598–539 BCE.

It's tricky to read this passage in our context—there is a risk that readers will conflate ancient Israel with the modern state of Israel. A more helpful way to read it is to take the opportunity to review the historical origins of these three exile stories and explore their renewed relevance in later texts.

The text's exodus imagery recalls the immediately prior enslavement of the Hebrews in Egypt. That was a kind of exile, though it is not usually referred to as such. The Holy One drew the Hebrews both out of Egypt and into the wilderness as an act of divine “favor” (*hen* in Hebrew, “grace” in the NRSVue). It's a word that is used frequently in the book of Exodus and is repeated here in Jeremiah.

Imagery from the eighth century's Assyrian exile appears throughout this passage as well. The words *Israel* (the Northern Kingdom during the time of the divided monarchy), *Samaria* (the capital of the Northern Kingdom), and *Ephraim* (the southern part of that northern region) each refers to the region that fell to Assyria in 722. Yet these Northern Kingdom exiles proclaim, “Come, let us go up to Zion”—a reference to Jerusalem, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. When the Northern Kingdom fell, it was severed from the Southern Kingdom for two centuries. This passage was finalized in the century that followed. Thus it poses a wildly hopeful rewriting of history, reuniting all those from the original (though optimistically reimagined) United Kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Saul, David, and Solomon. It even envisions the end of ancient Israel's third and most devastating exile, the Babylonian exile of 598–539 BCE.

In six short verses, Jeremiah makes sermon illustrations of the enslavement in Egypt, the Assyrian destruction and exile of the Northern Kingdom, and the Babylonian exile. Through these stories, the prophet expounds upon the divine gift of postexilic times.

Note that it was not a foregone conclusion that God would save the people from their captors, whether it was Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon. In fact, the previous chapter of Jeremiah explains that God imposed a certain amount of exilic suffering on the people as their due punishment. While I find that theology quite problematic—I reject it for my own faith and certainly for pastoral work—there it is in the Bible. Yes, some of our ancestors in faith interpreted much of their suffering as fitting punishment. But the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes (among others) rightly pushed against that view, and they are in the canon, too.

The reason Jeremiah gives for why God saved the people is the gorgeous centerpiece of this short passage, and it is fittingly embraced for Easter. That reason is love. In fact, a triple love, articulated using two different Hebrew words. First, the common word for love, *‘ahav*, which refers to romantic love in the Song of Songs and has broader meaning in numerous other places in the canon. That same word is repeated right away, though

amplified by “forever.” Finally, the prophet enlists the word *hesed*, which so frequently appears with God as the subject that I like to think of it in its own category: God-love. NRSVue translates it here as “faithfulness.”

This thrice-stated divine love, which saved the people from their suffering, makes a point not so different from the one emphasized in Matthew’s telling of the Easter story, in which two women show up to find an empty tomb. Fear! Joy! Worship! For a visual illustration, Jeremiah mentions tambourines and dancing—yes, we should be thinking of Miriam and the other women in Exodus 15:20–21. A quick search on “women and hand drums terracotta” on the Jewish Women’s Archive website (thanks to Carol Meyers) reveals concrete, lovely examples of how compelling this image must have been in the ancient world.

Venturing into the oracle that immediately follows our Jeremiah reading, we find a heartfelt welcome for individuals with disabilities (31:7–9). As illustrations, these participants are as unlikely as the women in Matthew who are the first to visit the empty tomb, only later informing their male counterparts.

The theological point here is that the Holy One has a fervent love for those who are suffering and outcast. Jeremiah illustrates a generations-old attention to the oppressed, exiled, trampled, and dispossessed. Yet these texts implore us to celebrate with them, led by the women and their tambourines, whether they are standing beside newly escaped waters or an empty tomb.