Following the fall of Jerusalem and the horrendous things that took place there, believers try to understand what had happened. They are not complaining; they see the ruins as deserved punishment for their many excesses and constant rejection of God’s warnings. Yet, they know that the Lord loves his people: they believe this, feel it and proclaim it.

When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they might have gathered to pray together on the ruins of what had been the temple, and taken turns with these laments. Later they continued yearly to pray them on the date of the catastrophe, and much later the Church adopted the custom of using them in the days she remembers the death of Jesus.

In the Lord’s Passion, the believer sees the sum total of the suffering and anxiety of humankind. These poems help us to look with the same compassion on the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the destitute. They will help us to unite the vision of universal pain with the sense of human sinfulness and responsibility.

A Jewish tradition attributes these poems to Jeremiah. They do seem to manifest a spirit very similar to his.

First lamentation

1 How forlorn the city lies, once teeming with people! How like a widow is she, once mistress of the nations! A princess among the cities, she has now become a slave.

2 She spends her nights weeping, drenching her cheeks with tears. Who is there to comfort her among all her lovers? All her friends have betrayed her and have become her enemies.

3 Humiliated, exhausted, Judah has gone into exile but she finds no rest among the nations where she sojourns; her pursuers have overtaken her where there is no way of escape.

4 All roads to Zion are in mourning; no one comes to her feasts. Her gates are deserted, her priests groan, her virgins grieve. What bitter anguish she suffers!
5 She is at the mercy of her foes who enjoy prosperity and power. Yahweh himself has made her suffer for all her iniquity. Her children, driven into captivity, take the lonely road to exile.
6 Gone from the daughter of Zion is all her majestic splendor. Her rulers, like harts that find no pasture, have fled helplessly before the oppressors.
7 Jerusalem recalls her days of wandering and affliction, her people fell into the hands of her foes and there was no help. Haters gloated over her downfall and laughed at her destruction.

Greatly has Jerusalem sinned; she has become as a thing unclean. Honored before, but now despised by those who have seen her naked, she herself groans in dismay and turns her face away.

Her filth clings to her skirt. She gave no thought to her doom, and so her fall came suddenly, with no one to offer comfort. “Look, O Yahweh, upon my misery, for my enemy has overcome me.”

She has seen how the enemy has laid hands on her treasures. She has seen how the nations have defiled her Sanctuary—those people you have not allowed to come into your assembly.

All her people groan as they search for bread; just to keep themselves alive, they give their jewels for food. Look, Yahweh, and mark how I have been despised.

All you who pass by, look and see. Is there any calamity like this, inflicted on me by Yahweh on the day of his burning anger.

From above he sent a fire down into my very bones, he ensnared my feet and threw me down, and left me in pain the whole day long.

He bound my sins into a yoke and fastened them together, then set them upon my neck and caused my strength to fail. Yahweh gave me into the hands of those I cannot withstand.

Yahweh has spurned the bravest of my fighters; he has summoned an army to crush my young warriors. Yahweh has trodden in his wine press Judah’s virgin daughter.

This is what I weep about, what makes my tears well up. No one is near to restore my spirit, no one at hand to console me. My children are desolate, for the enemy has triumphed.

Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to give comfort. Yahweh has decreed for Jacob that his neighbors become his foes. As an unclean thing among them has Jerusalem become.

Yahweh acts justly, for I have defied his order. Listen, all you peoples, and see how I suffer. My young men and maidens have all gone into exile.

I cried for help to my lovers, but they betrayed me. My priests and my elders perished in the city they sought anything to eat, but finally they had to die.
20 Look, Yahweh, upon my distress: all within me is in anguish.
My heart recoils within me:
I know that I have been rebellious.
See, outside, the sword that kills,
and within, death that stalks.

21 People have heard my moaning but no one comes to comfort me.
My foes have known of my suffering, they rejoice at what you have done.
Hasten the day you have proclaimed, that they may be even as I am.

22 Let their evil come before you, and deal with them as you have dealt with me on account of my sins.
Great indeed is my groaning. How sick at heart I am!

Second lamentation

Oh, how Yahweh in his anger has despised the daughter of Zion!
Israel's glory he has flung from heaven down to earth;
unmindful of his footstool on the day of his wrath.

2 Without pity Yahweh has shattered in Jacob every dwelling.
He has torn down in his anger the ramparts of Judah's daughter.
He has thrown her rulers and her king to the ground, dishonored.

3 He has cut down in his anger the horn of Israel's might.
He has withdrawn his right hand at the approach of the enemy.
In Jacob, he has blazed like a fire, he has devoured all around.

4 Like an enemy he has bent his bow, his right hand steadying the arrow.
All our pride of manhood he slew as he took his stand as a foe, pouring out fury like fire upon the tent of Zion's daughter.

5 The Lord has become an enemy who has laid Israel in ruins.
He has destroyed all her palaces and laid waste her fortresses.
He has multiplied the tears of the daughter of Judah.

6 Yahweh has wrecked her dwelling, laid waste her place of meeting.
He has made Zion forget her appointed feasts and Sabbaths; he has spurned in his fierce wrath king and prophet and priest.

7 The Lord has rejected his altar, has forsaken his Sanctuary.
He has handed over the walls of her tower to the enemy, whose triumphant shouts are heard in the temple of Yahweh.

8 Yahweh resolved to tear down the ramparts of Zion's daughter.
He stretched out the measuring line, and did not relent from bringing ruin.
He made both wall and rampart mourn, till, together, they crumbled down.

9 Her gates have sunk into the ground; broken and removed are their bars.
Her king and rulers live in exile among the nations.
No more message for their prophets, no more visions from Yahweh.

10 The elders of the daughter of Zion sit in silence upon the ground, their heads sprinkled with dust, their bodies wrapped in sackcloth, while Jerusalem's young women bow their heads to the ground.

11 With weeping, my eyes are spent; my soul is in torment because of the downfall of the daughter of my people, because children and infants faint in the open spaces of the town.

12 To their mothers they say, "Where is the bread and wine?"
as they faint like wounded men in the streets and public squares, as their lives ebb away in their mothers' arms.

13 To what can I compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem?
Who can save or comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion?
Deep as the sea is your affliction, and who can possibly heal you?

14 Your prophets' visions were worthless and false.
Had they warned of your sins, your fate might have been averted.
3 I am a man who has known calamity from the rod of his wrath. He has driven and brought me into darkness, not into the light. He turns his hand against me alone, all the day long, again and again.

4 He has worn away my flesh and skin; he has broken all my bones. He assails me and surrounds me with tribulation and bitterness. He leaves me to dwell in darkness, like those who have long been dead.

7 He has walled me in without escape; he has weighed me down with chains. I could not even cry for help, for he has stopped my prayer. He bars my way with stones and left me helplessly alone.

10 Like a bear lying in ambush, like a lion waiting for its prey, he lunged at me, tore me to pieces, and left me alone and helpless. Then he drew his bow and aimed his arrow at me. He pierced my sides with arrows from his quiver. I have become a laughingstock, a topic of songs for all the people.

15 He has sated me with bitter food; he has made me drunk with wormwood. He has broken my teeth with gravel and thrown me down in the ashes. He has deprived my soul of peace, till I have forgotten happiness. Now I say, “Gone are my hopes and all my confidence in Yahweh.”

19 Recalling my affliction and homelessness is wormwood and gall. I have become a laughingstock, a topic of songs for all the people. He has sated me with bitter food; he has made me drunk with wormwood.

16 He has broken my teeth with gravel and thrown me down in the ashes. He has deprived my soul of peace, till I have forgotten happiness.

20 Look, Yahweh, and answer: Why have you treated us like this? Why must women eat their little ones, whom they have nursed in their arms? Why must priest and prophet be slaughtered in the Sanctuary of the Lord? In the dust of the streets lie the young and the old, both virgins and young men—all fallen by the sword. You have killed on the day of your fury; you have slaughtered without mercy.

22 As for a feast day, you bade terrors to come from every side. There was, on the day of your anger, neither fugitive nor survivor. My enemy has murdered all whom I bore and reared.

22 Yahweh’s love abides unceasingly.
His compassion is never consumed;
every morning it is renewed.  
And his love remains ever faithful.

“My portion is Yahweh,” says my soul.  
“On him shall I rely.”

Yahweh is good to those who hope in him,  
to souls who search for him.  
It is rewarding to wait in silence for Yahweh’s salvation.  
It is good for man to bear the yoke from his youth.

Let him sit alone in silence when Yahweh fastens the yoke on him.  
Let him put his lips to the dust there may still be hope.  
Let him offer his cheek to be struck; let him be overwhelmed with insult.

For it is not forever that the Lord rejects man.  
In the abundance of his love he punishes, but has compassion.  
For he does not willingly abase or afflict the human race.

To trample underfoot the prisoners of the land,  
to deny a man his rights in the presence of the Most High,  
to deprive people of justice—the Lord does not approve of this.

Who can command and execute what the Lord has not willed?  
From the mouth of the Most High come all things, good or bad.  
Why then, should mortals complain when punished for their sin?

Let us search and examine our ways and return to Yahweh.

Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven, and say:  
We have sinned and rebelled, and you have not forgiven us.

Clothed in anger you have pursued us without mercy.

You have wrapped yourself in clouds so that no prayer can reach you.  
You have reduced us to dust and refuse among the nations.  
Our foes have opened wide their mouths against us.

Terror is our lot: pitfall, ruin and desolation.  
Great is my grief over the downfall of the daughter of my people.  
No respite, no relief, as my tears flow ceaselessly, till Yahweh looks down from heaven and sees.

My soul will grieve in torment for the women of my city.  
Like a bird I have been hunted by my foes without cause.

They flung me alive into a pit and cast stones at me.  
As the waters closed over my head, I thought I would never again live.

Out of the depths I called on your name, O Yahweh.  
You heard; you have not been deaf to my cry for relief.

When I called, you even came near and told me not to fear.

O Lord, you took up my case and redeemed my life.

You have seen the wrong they did me, uphold my cause!

You have seen how resentfully they plotted to destroy my life.

O Yahweh, you have heard the insults hurled at me, their insidious plots;  
You have been aware of their thoughts, their muttering against me all day long.

Look at them—sitting or standing—mocking me in their song!

Repay them as they deserve, according to their deeds, O Yahweh.

Harden their hearts; hold them under your curse.

Pursue and destroy them in fury from under the heavens, O Yahweh.

Fourth lamentation

1 How tarnished the gold has become.  
The fine gold has lost its luster.
They wandered like blind men, groping through the streets, so defiled with blood that none could touch their garments.

“Go away!” people cried at them. “Do not touch us! You are unclean!” They became fugitives wandering about, but even the nations would drive them out.

Yahweh himself has dispersed them; no longer does he watch over them. The priests are shown no honor; the elders are given no favor.

Our watchmen strained their eyes, looking for help in vain. We anxiously waited for an ally, who failed to save us.

Like dogs our enemies hounded us and kept us off the streets. As our end drew near, we knew our days were numbered.

Swifter were our pursuers, than the eagles in the sky. Over the hills they chased us, they waylaid us in the wilderness.

Our life’s breath, Yahweh’s anointed, was taken captive in their pit— he of whom we said, “In his protection we shall live among the nations.”

Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz. But you shall be drunk and stripped bare, for to you also the cup will pass.

Your ordeal, daughter of Zion, will end; for your exile will not be prolonged. But Edom’s daughter will be chastised, and her wickedness will be exposed.

Fifth Lamentation

Remember, Yahweh, what has befallen us. Look, and see our disgrace,

our home handed over to strangers, our inheritance to foreigners.

We are as orphans, fatherless, and early widowed are our mothers.

Our drinking water we must buy; for our own wood we have to pay.

With the yoke stifling our breath, without rest we work to death.
From our hearts joy is gone; we danced then, but now we lament.

The garlands have fallen from our heads. Woe upon us, for we have sinned!

Over all this our hearts are sick; and our eyes have grown weak:

for we see Mount Zion desolate; the jackals prowl within.

You, O Yahweh, forever reign; your throne endures from age to age.

Why, then, should you abandon us, why forget us for so long a time?

Lead us to you again, O Yahweh, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old.

Have you utterly rejected us? Is there no end to your wrath against us?