



“Don’t call me Naomi ... Call me Mara...” (Ruth 1:20): re-thinking about God in the face of COVID-19 trauma

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Abstract

Since the fall of humanity from grace (Genesis 3:1f), people have forever been struggling with mental illness. In fact, one can say that the Bible as a whole contains much evidence of deep pain both at communal and personal levels. One finds in it struggles for survival, the pain of exile, death, war, accounts of political oppression and various other ills that are weaved together in its narratives. While, in short, it is a story of trauma, it is also a theological and spiritual response to it. Singling out the story of Naomi, this paper takes a life course approach into the story of her life. The intention is to understand her traumatic experience following the death of her husband and two sons and juxtapose that with the lived experiences of women who lost dear ones to COVID-19. While Naomi thought that God had turned away from her, it was rather the opposite as her name came to be captured in the annals of Israelite history as David’s great grandmother (Ruth 1:17). Though her life story is about the long way down, it was equally a long way up as the plan of God began to unfold. It is the same God who continues to open new pathways to women still struggling to grapple with the devastating trauma of COVID -19.

Keywords: COVID- 19, God, mara, mental illness, Naomi, trauma, women.

Introduction

The story of Naomi has often been overshadowed by the account of a determined daughter-in-law, Ruth, who stubbornly refused to leave Naomi and go back to her house and eventually found herself being married to Boaz, king David’s grandfather. Little attention therefore, both in public and scholarly circles has been given to Naomi. Traditionally, as averred by Potgieter and Taute (2020), much attention in scholarly works has been put on Ruth and on the theme of kinsman-redeemer. As a result, then, hers appeared a case of having been forsaken by God, and similarly, it appears as if she has not received as much attention in the academic circles. It is this neglect that has generated interest in writing about her. Taking a life-course approach into her life reveals that despite her considering herself as mara ‘God forsaken,’ the Almighty had an answer to her mental anguish. At the end, her fulfilled life story has a lot to teach other women and the general populace that it is not the character of God to abandon those who suffer mental anguish of any sort though there is every temptation to feel like that at the height of trauma. Given that Naomi’s story has a lot to teach about God, it justifiably deserves attention as it provides lessons on how humanity should handle mental illness in this contemporary age characterized by different forms of trauma. In this article, the story of Naomi provides the lenses with which to discuss the plight



of many African women whose husbands, sons and daughters have since departed to the next world so untimely, especially due to COVID -19.

Methodology

In the biblical section of this paper, the method that was basically employed is that of a life course approach. Life course can be conceptualized as a series of social occurrences that someone experiences across their life (Hartin & Serva, 2024). Now when considered as a perspective, it refers thus to studying and understanding the ways in which people live and the various psychological, physical, social, religious and sometimes even political factors that affect their lives. In the present context, the paper uses this approach to study how the socioeconomic and historical contexts determined the life events of Naomi and resulting in her perceiving herself as 'Mara' – God's forsaken. The life course approach to Naomi's life will usher in a contextual application of her life situation to African women and in particular Shona women. How her life, in other words, represents other women and in particular, surviving spouses of COVID-19 victims who continue to suffer today from various traumatic experiences that they went through shall be demonstrated as the paper unfolds. Before wading into the story of Naomi and the inherent lessons that can be derived from it, it is prudent to begin by reflecting on the issue of mental health in Old Testament times so as to attain a wholesome picture of God's involvement in the ups and downs of life.

The Old Testament and Mental Health

Since the banishment of humanity from the 'garden of delight,' Eden (Genesis 3:23), the search for the former state of mental bliss appears to have been one of the major preoccupations for humanity. Mental health, however, has remained elusive as sin robbed humanity the privilege it had. In most cases, mental health has come to be replaced by mental illness.

It is interesting to note, however, that the Bible does not address directly the issue of mental illness save for Deuteronomy 28:28-29 where Moses tells the Israelites that "the Lord will strike you with madness, blindness and panic, so that even at midday you will grope like a blind man in the dark, unable to find your way" (The African Bible). This curse falls within a periscope of curses (Deuteronomy 28:15-68) which emanate from a disobedient life-style and they reflect a loss of all the benefits God had promised (Deuteronomy 28:15-19). In regard to this particular curse whereby the Lord warns Israel that she would have to reckon with madness, it is made against the possibility of Israel rebelling and worshipping Canaanite gods. Seen from this biblical angle, mental illness therefore can be a direct result of God humbling a people or an individual.

While mental illness could result from God humbling humanity, there appears a plethora of causes to mental illness. The Bible itself is a living testimony of many people who exhibited symptoms of depression, anxiety and other types of mental illness (Kennington, 2023). The case of Cain, for example, who sank into depression when his offering did not find favor before God is enough proof that humanity has since been battling with mental illness following the fall from grace. Apart from Cain, we have the case of Saul who is said to have suffered severe melancholy and fits of sullenness and anger (I Samuel 16:14; 28:15). Saul, it appears, was emotionally disturbed by a number of things: David eluded capture (1 Samuel 18:8-13); the Philistines were waging war against him and appeared to be growing in strength (1 Samuel 28:15); and the rejection of his request when he conjured up the spirit of the dead Samuel (I Samuel 28:8-25). As he camped on Mount Gilboa (1 Samuel 28:4f) he was in a state of severe misery and near-terror over the



advance of the Philistine army into camp on the opposite hillside, and he knew quite well that no happy ending awaited him the next day.

The prophet Elijah also suffered from mental illness after he had instigated the killing of Baal prophets following their defeat in a contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:20f). When Queen Jezebel declared war against him (1 Kings 19:2), Elijah entered into a distraught condition for forty days and nights. He was so depressed such that he was not able even to meet his own basic personal needs. Due to his mental anguish, the only thing he desired was for God to take his life. He prayed: "This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4).

Equally worth to mention is the mental anguish reflected in Psalm 6:7-8. Though the immediate context leading to the anguish is not given, the Psalmist cries to God with the words: "I am wearied with sighing; all night long tears drench my bed; my couch is soaked with weeping. My eyes are dimmed with sorrow, worn out because of my foes." These words reveal that the sufferer had been suffering for a long time and now was deeply discouraged. The poetical exaggeration in verse 7 'I am wearied with sighing; all night long tears drench my bed; my couch is soaked with weeping' is meant to express the intensity of the mental pain he was going through. He felt that no other human person could better understand his depression and so he turned to the only one who could really help and he honestly told God about his sorrows.

What the above cited cases clearly show is that when closely examined, the Old Testament, as a whole, portrays human suffering both at individual and communal levels. This finds echo in Cook and Hamley (2020:15) who made a remarkable observation that "the Old Testament is a collection of texts shaped by pain and trauma: struggles for survival, war, slavery, exile, and political oppression are ever present, and these texts weave together accounts of personal pain and trauma." Caught up also in the web of pain and trauma was Naomi. While her story, just like other narratives of human sufferings noted above, is an affirmation that the Bible is indeed a story of trauma, the unfolding of events in her life are enough proof that the Bible is equally a theological and spiritual response to such trauma.

Naomi's Traumatic Experience

Naomi's trauma appears to have been triggered by a series of challenging events in her life. The Chewa of Malawi, as observed by Isabel Phiri (2006:320) have a proverbial saying: *Mvula ikakuona litsilo sikata* 'When the rain sees dirt on you, it does not stop, meaning that often one problem follows another.' Similarly, the Shona would say *Nhamo haibvi pane imwe* 'One problem follows the other.' Baptizing as it were Naomi to the world of pain and suffering was a famine threat. As narrated at the beginning of the book of Ruth, the family of Naomi which consisted of herself, her husband Elimelech, and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion had to leave their hometown Bethlehem of Judah, migrating to Moab because of a famine that had overtaken Israel during the period of the Judges (Ruth 1:1-2). While displacement by famine is a stressful experience for anyone, it is particularly a disturbing traumatic experience for women because it means being uprooted from a familial territory to fend for the family. It is a common experience that families look up to the mother to address issues related to politics of the stomach and Naomi being the mother could not have escaped this.

Equally standing as another force to reckon with for her was a refugee status in the land of Moab. Women and girls in particular tend to stand more disadvantaged when they are classified as refugees as it can mean exposure to sexual abuse or any other form of gendered harassment. Moreover, if the information in Deuteronomy 23:4-7 is anything to go by that Moabites wanted to



curse Israel but had to hire Balaam, a Midianite, to do it for them, then this would mean there was already an enmity between the two countries. We find the Lord even saying through Moses about the Moabites: “Never promote their peace and prosperity as long you live” (verse 7). Indeed, it appears as Moab remained an enemy of Israel throughout the monarchic period (2 Samuel 8:2). Such enmity between the two nations should have worsened the refugee status of Naomi’s family with the heat being more felt by Naomi as she had to ensure the availability of food on the table for her growing family when Mahlon and Chilion later got married (Ruth 1:4). Even if grandsons had been born to Naomi, another challenge that awaited her was how to handle an existent prohibition from Yahweh that such offspring of illicit relations with Moabite women were never to be admitted into the community of the Lord, nor any descendants of theirs even to the 10th generation (Dt 23:3-6; Num 22-24; 25:1-3, The African Bible).

More devastating to Naomi was the passing on of Elimelech her husband and then ten years after, both Mahlon and Chilion died also (Ruth 1:3-4). This was the most heartbreaking moment of her life for she felt robbed of everything she had. Referring to this dark cloud in her life, she tells fellow women she met upon her return to Bethlehem: “I went away with an abundance, but the Lord has brought me back destitute,” (Ruth 1:21, The African Bible). Seized with what had just come to pass and possibly chronicling also the successive challenges that had haunted her life, she could not accept why all this was happening to her and the only conclusion she arrived at was to define herself as mara, ‘one punished by God.’ Using her natural intuition, she felt that blessing and fulfillment were no longer an option. She, in other words, was pretty realistic in assessing her life and she resigned to disappointment, blaming God for her condition. This finding is consistent with Potgieter and Taute (2020) who opine that her gnawing sorrow and bereavement, having experienced loss both physically and emotionally, inevitably affected her spiritual relationship with Yahweh. The hope she earlier had, had died with her husband and sons; there had not even been grandchildren to count on. Her status is summed up by Phyllis Tribble (1999, n.p) who says: “Naomi shrinks...From wife to widow, from mother to no-mother, this woman is stripped of all identity.”

While it is possible to concur with Naomi’s interpretation that God was punishing her family for having gone to live among Moabites who worshipped other gods and even intermarried with them as outrightly forbidden in Deuteronomy 7:3, such an interpretation as opined by Phiri (2006), is not in sync with the experiences of other Hebrews who took refuge in foreign lands during times of famine. God still cares for those who remain devoted to divine obedience even in strange lands.

Having gone through the traumatic experience of Naomi’s life and her interpretation of it as being forsaken by God, one realizes that the mental anguish she experienced is not hers alone but is shared by many African women whose husbands, sons and daughters have since departed to the next world so untimely, especially due to COVID-19. It is these lived realities of African women and their perception of God and the ancestors that the following section focuses on.

Post Effects of COVID-19 on African Women

To date, in Zimbabwe alone, so much written literature has been produced on COVID -19. Topical issues that have been covered so far include: The Church’s interventions to COVID-19 (Mutsvedu & Chirongoma, 2022), COVID -19 and indigenous religion (Sipeyiye, 2022; Manyonganise, 2023); COVID-19 and domestic violence during lockdowns (Hlatywayo, 2023; Uzobo & Ayimore, 2021); ramifications of COVID -19 in Zimbabwe and future prospects (Rusero & Mawere, 2021; Mavengano, Marevesa & Jakaza. 2023); COVID-19 & herbal medicine (Dandara, Dzobo &



Chirikure, 2021). The aforementioned are just some of the highlights of the academic engagements on COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, there are so many other interesting thematic areas that I have purposively left out. The good part with what has been highlighted so far is that it frees me from unnecessary tautology, not bothering myself with a repeat of detailed definitional and historical issues surrounding COVID-19. For this study, it may suffice to operate with a basic definition provided by WHO (2024) which defines Coronavirus disease (COVID- 19) as an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus. Making its first appearance in China in 2019, the disease quickly spread the world over owing to its contagious nature. Acknowledging the in-depth coverage on COVID-19 history and theories of its origins by the above-mentioned esteemed researchers, I can safely now move on to look at the mental anguish of African women who were robbed of their dear ones due to COVID-19.

The Sting of COVID-19

According to O'Neill (2023) in 2020, the mortality rate for women in Zimbabwe stood at 295.01 per 1,000 female adults whilst that of males stood at 412.65 per 1,000 male adults. This finds support from the World Bank which puts the figure at 413 per 1,000 male adults and 295 for their female counterparts (The World Bank, 2023). The above figures are enough proof that more men died of COVID-19 related complications compared to their female counterparts. What this translates to is that the sting of COVID-19 was more felt by women. Apart from being care-givers to their own families and societies during the hard-pressed moment, the blow turned to be toughest when it involved the lives of their dear husbands.

In Shona culture it is a taboo following up inquisitively on someone who has lost a relative to gauge the level of pain that they would be going through. The taboo finds expression in the Shona proverb: *Afirwa haatariswi kumeso* (literally: Thou shall not look at the bereaved directly in the eyes), meaning that it is inappropriate to remind someone in the heat of the moment the problem they are going through. It is indeed often the case that many grieving spouses would not be at liberty to discuss their loss in the heat of the moment and worse with strangers. Based on that observation, it was not possible to follow up on women who lost their husbands due to COVID-19. For purposes of this research, it sufficed to work on the known pain associated with the loss of a dear one. This finds echo in Seiler et al (2020) who aver that losing a life partner is the most traumatic and painful experience an individual can go through. Being human, one would not be wrong to assume that some may have felt like Naomi that God and the ancestors had abandoned them. Just as in Naomi's case, some lost not only their husbands but also some dear close family members. It was so devastating as spouses of deceased persons could not even perform a befitting farewell to a dear one due to the draconian restrictions that the government had imposed. This corroborates with Mataruse (2021) who opines that COVID-19 restrictions were in sharp contrast to cultural rudiments and they heavily transformed the picture of funeral rituals. Mourners had to shift the way they said goodbye and were diffused to mourn apart at the most opportune time they needed to be together, thus complicating the grieving process.

The loss due to COVID-19 was so traumatic that the pandemic at times did not allow enough time to seek adequate medical assistance. For those who had some underlying conditions, it turned out to be very swift in robbing their lives. The death due to COVID-19 related complications, in other words, happened so fast that the deceased appeared to be present yet he/she was gone. Such scenarios naturally pushed surviving spouses to ask: 'why me God?' Surviving spouses



could thus easily identify with Naomi's hopelessness and bitter despair. Life had dealt her bitter blows and her spirit was crushed. It was almost impossible for her to imagine that God could turn things around and God did anyhow. This is why her story remains a source of inspiration to those with crushed spirits. The following section demonstrates how crushed women can draw life from Naomi's cistern.

Naomi's case as a solution to women suffering the after effects of Covid-19

The story of Naomi has a lot to teach when read from the context of women still struggling with the post effects of Covid-19. Death is arguably the most difficult loss to attach the adage 'let bygones be bygones' especially if it is characterized by a sudden loss of a cherished family member. Despite a period of almost about ten years following the death of her husband (Ruth 1:4) and later the death of her remaining sons, Naomi still failed to manage the loss she had experienced. This comes out clear in her words to fellow Bethlehemite women: "Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has made it very bitter for me. I went away with an abundance, but the Lord has brought me back destitute. Why should you call me Naomi, since the Lord has pronounced against me...?" (Ruth 1: 20-21, The African Bible). Naomi's remark was testimony that the pleasantness or sweetness of her name no longer applied to her life and circumstances (Potgieter & Taute, 2020). She used to be full but now she was empty - she was once a wife but now a widow and she was a mother but now she had become childless. Be that as it may that Naomi had challenges in trying to get over her pain, at least she had a good start in finding a solution to that pain. She did not bottle up her pain but managed to pour out her heart to fellow women. This is an important step that needs to be taken also by women who are still struggling to get over the pain of losing their dear husbands to Covid-19. Naomi thus represents other women who find themselves in the same predicament that she was in. Negative self-talk is dangerous if left alone hence it is important to pour out one's heart if in pain. There is healing associated with this outpouring of the heart.

Equally to be learnt from her story is that God is able to write straight in the crooked lines of any person's life. Naomi's traumatic experience had brought her to a simple conclusion that God's hand had gone out against her (Ruth 1:13). Following the events in her life one can at least understand and appreciate why she had come to think so about God. In normal life, it is not easy to embrace as normal when misfortunes one after the other continue to strike the same individual or community, a person or people are bound to ask 'why me/us God?'

It is, however, important to remember that while the Bible is about trauma, it is also a theological and spiritual response to it. With Naomi, God responded to her trauma by providing for her needs through Ruth and Boaz. When Obed was born, women neighbours spoke of him as belonging to Naomi (Ruth 4:7) rather than as Elimelech's child as levirate customs would have dictated. From the words of the women: "Blessed is the Lord who has not failed to provide you today with an heir...He will be your comfort and the support of your old age..." (Ruth 4:14-15), one is able to see that Obed became a blessing for Naomi who had come empty from Moab. While Naomi thought God had stripped her of everything, God proves her wrong by making her full again. On the social scale of the people of Israel, Naomi, due to widowhood and being without sons anymore to support her anymore in old age, had come to occupy the bottom rank. However, by the grace of God who is able to write straight in the crooked lines of any person's life, she moved up the social ladder to be known as King David's great grandmother.



What comes out clear then is that it is the nature of God to be concerned about the day-to-day affairs of ordinary people regardless of the situation they might be in. God cares even for those whose circumstances were a result of their own sin. In Genesis 4: 15, God is seen caring for Cain who had become a fugitive following the murder of his own brother Abel. In the same way God cared for Cain, God established cities of refuge where accidental murderers could flee to from the hands of those who would be seeking revenge (Exodus 21:12-14; Numbers 35:9-34; Deuteronomy 19:3-13; 1 Chronicles 6:42-55).

While indeed God has the welfare of ordinary people and in particular widows at heart, God does not expect them to just fold their hands expecting God to do everything for them. God works through the efforts they do to improve their own lives. In the case of Naomi, she took matters in her own hands to improve her life assisted by her daughter-in-law, Ruth. They forged an alliance and initiated ways to survive, using the existent patriarchal structures to their advantage. Naomi hatched a plan that Boaz marries Ruth, and Ruth executed it, taking to their advantage the custom of levirate marriage (Ruth 3 – 4). As Naomi lived her life pragmatically, making practical decisions based on her best intuitive ability, God was behind each of those decisions. Unknown to her, God guided her in the midst of them the whole way. Just as in other plans, God was not on the forefront of the arranged levirate marriage but it did not go unnoticed, hence God helped the women achieve what they wanted, blessing the marriage of Ruth to Boaz. This resonates with Hubbard's (1997) observation that the book of Ruth as a whole teaches that Yahweh's sovereign control sometimes comes secretly cloaked in human run events. Through Ruth, the Almighty began to weave restoration back into Naomi's life. God had more in mind than just the survival of the two widows. When Boaz and Ruth had a child; Naomi had a grandson and thus she got her real name back. She was no longer "Mara" – bitter, she felt pleasant, delightful and lovely just what her name meant. Thus, the concluding years of Naomi's life were rich and full – something she could hardly have dreamt of.

In the same way that God worked in Naomi's life, God continues to do the same with anyone, including the victims of the devastating effects of Covid-19 included, who feel robbed of everything that is of value in their lives. It is against this background that in this article, I beseech women who have been widowed as a result of COVID-19, to take a leaf from Ruth's life and understand that death is not the end of road but a beginning of a new life, a life of possibilities and new relationships that can lead to fullness of life once again with God's help. Mataruse (2021:121) was thus correct to conclude that even though coping with an untimely loss is undeniably a very tough time for the remaining spouse, there is still hope. The old adage crystalizes that there is always a light at the end of every dark tunnel.

Conclusion

A life course approach to Naomi's life has revealed that she is a woman who went through a lot; from struggles with famine, negotiating with a refugee status, losing a husband and followed later by the loss of the surviving sons, feeling abandoned by God and eking out a life as a widow, to becoming David's great grandmother. Naomi, as argued in this article represents other women and in particular, surviving spouses of COVID-19 victims who continue to suffer today from various traumatic experiences that they went through. Her story is a life lesson that in order to get over one's pain, it is important in the first place to shun bottling up pain but rather share it with others and then take the initiative to move on with life, trusting in God's leading and provision. Once everything is done following God's path, then God does the rest in restoring life to its fullness once more.



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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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