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Faithfully retelling our stories:

how faith, culture and context impact women's life stories.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the layers of story hidden within the Book of Ruth, the character of Naomi and the application of that multi-faceted story to the faith development of women today. Rigorous research points towards an innovative response, disrupting the traditional methodological approaches to research. The contextualisation and feminisation of the story is expressed through life writing and revisioning.

Section one considers the reasons for and the opportunities provided by absences in the biblical narrative. Absences within biblical texts often restrict our understanding of the female protagonists. However, rather than resigning ourselves to the fear that Old Testament women fall through these gaps, I argue that the absences allow us to reimagine these characters and to begin to understand our shared humanity. Section two equips the reader with the tools with which to reimagine the context of the Book of Ruth. I peer into exegesis of the Hebrew text and midrash and I dig into biblical archaeology to uncover the importance of ritual as a means of integrating faith into daily life. This section also analyses the methods through which this research is subsequently transformed into a reimagined and engaging narrative.

Section three responds creatively and autoethnographically to the research gathered in the preceding sections. This imaginative response interweaves two styles of writing. The revisioned story of Naomi is interspersed with autobiographical episodes which focus on bereavement, loss of faith and the importance of community.

The iterative nature of the study has allowed me space to trial sections of the research and writing with various audiences. Section four explores the importance of foregrounding biblical women's stories. By excavating characters which are more than metaphor, we find protagonists from whom we can learn important lessons about the journey of faith. This section also evaluates how this research and creative response has been received among academic and faith communities and what more could be done to bring the character of Naomi to life.

Contents

Acknowledgement

When I first heard Heather Walton speak in a church about ten years ago, I promised myself that I would try to find a way to study creative writing with her. It was never my intention to do a Masters and I hold Doug Gay fully responsible for putting the idea into my head. I am so grateful to Heather, Mia Spiro and Zanne Domony-Lyttle for guiding my studies. Heather has observed and challenged my writing in such gentle, gracious ways. Mia Spiro has been a calm, reassuring voice and has urged me to keep going when I felt that my head might burst. Zanne Domoney-Lyttle invited me into a world of feminist theology which continues to inspire and shape my approach to the stories of biblical women. The invitation from Zanne and Sarah Nicholson to speak at the Women and Gender in the Bible and the Ancient World conference was one of the defining moments of this thesis. Thank you.

Writing is a strange and solitary pastime. I often imagine that real writers are stoic and silent about their work. That is not me. I have bored family, friends, colleagues and hairdressers with the story of a middle-aged woman in the midst of a crisis of faith. Thanks to my colleagues at Christian Aid Scotland who encouraged me to write the story of Ruth and Naomi for Christian Aid Week. Thanks to Auntie Heather and Moira for proof-reading an early draft.

Thanks to Paul and the boys for reminding me that there is a world beyond the laptop. You've got to live, laugh and love before you can write.

Many moments in life propel you towards adulthood. Becoming a mother and losing my mum were the two things that clinched it for me. I couldn't have done these last years without Julie, Ali and Dad. We are who we are because of each other. Much love always.

In memory of Louise Cathcart.

Author’s declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work, and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Two short paragraphs of the creative element of this thesis appear in a significantly revised form at leanneclelland.co.uk

Introduction

> And she saw that she was insisting on going with her, and she ceased speaking to her. And the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem, and it happened as they came to Bethlehem that the whole town was astir over them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?"
> (Ruth 1:18-19)[1]

This work proposes that the character of Naomi described in the story of the Book of Ruth may be able to creatively inform the faith development of women of the 21st century. I look, in particular, at the absence in the story of the journey Ruth and Naomi take from the plains of Moab to Bethlehem. Using the opportunity offered by this gap in the narrative, I reimagine this difficult journey across challenging landscapes of historical and religious significance. I rely on exegetical curiosity, Midrashic readings of the text and the opinions of a variety of commentators. This work interweaves a creative revisioning of Naomi's story with stories about my own life. Together, they produce a narrative of faith for maturing women: the leaving and returning to yourself; learning how to find faith and hope on the other side of grief and the divine importance of community.

Section one: Preparing the way

1.1 The opportunity of absences

Many scholars, including the influential critic Robert Alter, believe that the Book of Ruth was written in the post-exilic period, in part in counterpoint to the sanctions against intermarriage.[2] It is a story steeped in theology. This is a tale of names, of community and heritage, of land and harvest, of fullness and emptiness, of broken and mended hearts, of leaving and returning, of redemption. It seems to be a simple, redemptive love story and yet when we peer into it more closely we realise that we have been distracted. This story is no less vulnerable to cliché than any other. Behind the plucky foreigner and her dashing redeemer, lie untold moments of mundane grief, a long journey through the wilderness and the rhythms and routines of everyday life. And while the account appears to be rich in detail, closer reading reveals unusual absences. Key moments and motives are missing; significant decisions are glossed over and emotions are suppressed. Despite the book's title, there are three female protagonists. Orpah is sidelined for doing the right thing, Ruth is esteemed for rebelling against tradition and the Naomi, tired of all that life has served her, seems to call God to account for divine injustice. The story of Ruth and Naomi, is unique in the biblical canon, but it was a well-known folk tale of its time. Even now, if the modern reader chooses to notice gaps, they may discover that this old story is one which sounds very like our own.

The Book of Ruth is perhaps like a fishing net: the holes, in the correct proportions, are its mystery and its strength. The missing journey to Bethlehem, which I will explore in more detail later, is not the only absence in the tale of Ruth and Naomi. The narrational economy leaves gaps in at least eleven key moments:

- the reason for the departure from Bethlehem and the later departure from Moab;

- the practicalities of a woman's survival after her husband's death; the acculturation of Naomi's children – Mahlon and Killion - to Moabite and exiled Israelite culture;[3]
- Naomi's decision on the road, rather than on the plains of Moab, to send Orpah and Ruth home;[4]
- the first, chance encounter with the stranger Boaz who, in contrast, knows all about Ruth;[5]
- the sudden revelation of a piece of land which is redeemable by a kinsman;[6]
- Naomi and Ruth's location while Boaz is deciding their fate at the city gates;[7]
- Ruth's disappearance in the final scene while Naomi displays her grandchild.[8]

Commentators have suggested various reasons for these absences. Some suggest that the scope of the narrative is limited due to literary techniques such as the call and response form, chiastic structure and narrational economy.[9] Other commentators note contextual reasons for the gaps including the author's assumptions about the audience's knowledge and his/her overarching theological and societal agenda.[10] The Book of Ruth tills the ground for a family tree which will finally bear the long-anticipated messiah. Athalya Brenner proposes that the story has notable gaps in the retelling because it was an amalgamation of two distinct stories: a Naomi story and a Ruth story.[11] Brenner is particularly puzzled that Ruth and Naomi share the position of dominant heroine, exchanging that role as the story progresses. Brenner extracts the stories of each woman (as story variants A and B) reconstructing two hypothetical tales.[12] While I agree that, in a sense, the book does contain two separate stories of two women whose lives intersect and advance for their own personal and mutual benefit, I find Brenner's work here overly complicated and unconvincing. Women are often occluded in biblical narratives. Absences in accounts of them are not unique to the Book of Ruth. The patriarchal agenda of biblical story-telling does not reveal to us Sarah's role in Isaac's near-sacrifice or how the prodigal's mother reacted to her son's wanderings. We do not hear how Miriam, who lead the women across the Red Sea, is remembered in death.[13] We see only a glimpse of Rebekah and Samson's mother before they are 'disappeared'.[14] Perhaps, as Jewish

feminist poet Alicia Ostriker suggests, 'women have to be written off in order for male heroism to thrive and …[for] the establishment of the exclusively male covenant'.[15] But these stories of women which were first told as myth and legend, history and ritual, became law and canon.[16] These stories, with theological imagination and curiosity, continue to be reimagined and retold.

1.2 Absences: the big picture

'Turn it and turn it,' the rabbis say of the Torah, 'for everything is in it.'[17] Women are woven into the background of biblical texts by their silences and rejections, by their exclusion from the covenant, by their disappearing. Feminist theologians 'fill in the gaps' and the silences of the old stories. Ostriker traces the absence of fully formed female characters in the Hebrew bible from the earliest creation myth. She observes that the Mother Goddess, so prominent in ancient Near Eastern culture, is absorbed into an androgynous deity who prioritises Adam as the bearer of the divine covenant. Bereft of a divine goddess to reflect and refract, women begin to disappear from the divine stories from the time of Moses. Ostriker asks, 'Where are they now, bold midwives, mothers, sisters, disobedient princesses, bitter talking-back wives? Submerged; objects of the law; apparently passive.'[18]

Ann Jeffers takes a more nuanced approach than Ostriker, suggesting that women are not so much disappeared from the ritual life of ancient Israel, but that 'their visibility is double-edged: they are at the same time 'here and not here', reflecting the ambivalence of the male gaze.'[19] Jeffers' exploration of ritual theory is one to which I will return in the course of this thesis. Elizabeth Fiorenza, meanwhile, encourages us to not be defeated by the patriarchal agenda, which she describes as 'androcentric historiography and theology'.[20] Rather, she urges writers and theologians to find ways to break the silence. And, as is the quest of this thesis, she urges us 'to search for clues and allusions that indicate the reality about which the text is silent'.[21] When female protagonists fall silent in biblical stories where we might have expected hear from them, women who wish to be inspired by those texts must make a compromise. They

compromise themselves in order to fit into the story. Or they compromise the story to find their own lives within it. Alison Jasper, writing in response to Carol Christ's seminal text Womanspirit Rising, shares her relief that, thanks to the raised voices of feminist theologians, she no longer has to 'read herself sidewise into traditional biblical texts.[22] She suggests that when women put aside their scriptural shapeshifting they begin to 'intermingle and bleed into' the characters they find in the Bible.

Feminist theologians agree that women have always compromised their faith development in order to fit the meta-narrative of scripture. Nicola Slee is a theologian and poet whose rewriting of biblical women's lives through poetry and prayer has inspired my own journey. She observes that the result of absent, silent or half-formed female protagonists and biblical foremothers "has perpetuated the lack of voice and confidence with which many women struggle"[23]. I couldn't agree more.

1.3 Absences in the Book of Ruth

So why does it matter that this bucolic tale has gaps in the telling? The gaps matter because women of the bible, even as we only half-see them, hold powerful places in our imaginations. The gaps matter because, as Ellen Davis comments, 'If the stories we hear lack grace, warmth and 'bite', then the stories we tell will lack those qualities too.'[24] They matter if they prove to be holes through which women have fallen rather than sacred spaces in which to imagine ourselves. Deborah Feldman, in the Netflix miniseries, *Unorthodox,* which creatively reimagines her flight from an Orthodox Jewish sect says, 'People like me, we never saw ourselves being reflected back in the stories being told in popular culture, so we didn't really know how to create our own stories'.[25]

Women reading the Bible, or interpretations thereof, often cannot see themselves. Therefore, while the absence of fully formed stories of women grate – or should grate – upon the feminist reader, the gaps also open up the potential

to reimagine our own lives between the lines. This absence of women does not necessarily always diminish the text: the gaps can allow space for those who feel excluded to shape it to their own faith. Ostriker suggests that a multi-faceted approach to scripture is possible when the text is '…not necessarily unified, but riddled with gaps and contradictions and textual ambivalences. An insistent heterodoxy is… one of the great strengths of feminist thinking.'[26] Danya Ruttenberg suggests that a 'hermeneutic of curiosity', through which one might examine the text with an open mind, should replace a hermeneutic of suspicion which believes that all texts are misogynist until proved otherwise.[27] This curiosity prompted midrashists and students of the Targum to observe, interpret and reframe stories.[28] While the Targum observations of the Book of Ruth are fascinating in terms of the context and experience of exiled Aramaic-speaking Jews, this thesis restrains itself to Midrashic retellings. Midrash can be defined as a sea of interpretation of the Pentateuch and five scrolls which dialogues with the biblical text in order to create contemporary meaning from it.[29] Rabbis, believing that every word of the Torah is from God, sought – and continue to seek - to understand the nuance of any words within the text which seemed superfluous. Deborah Kahn-Harris describes midrash as the 'chief vehicle for the theological imagination'[30] which makes space for multiple, sometimes contradictory, authoritative interpretations of the source text. Kahn-Harris observes that 'midrash creates a hermeneutic where the biblical text is pregnant with divine meaning, not merely elastic, but alive with possibility'.[31] Wil Gafney goes further, arguing that midrash not only reflects and reframes the text itself, but also peers into the gaps within and through the text. 'In rabbinic thinking, each letter and the spaces between the letters are available for interpretive work.'[32] The midrashists lived for the gaps and found within them a space for 'dreaming… [and] imagining answers to their own questions'.[33] Those early revisionings of the stories, perhaps a cross between biblical commentary and fan fiction,[34] came from the pens of male rabbis. As a result, sometimes even more dust was kicked over women's stories.[35] Jewish author Norma Rosen believes that the time has come to 'release our ancient mothers from embedded silence, to retrieve them through imagination'.[36] Midrash, she says, 'like prayer at its truest, is an activist response to existential despair'.[37] The work of reinterpretation and reframing responds to the needs of the contemporary

reader, drawing them into the stories, perhaps explaining 'us better than we explain them'.[38]

The absences and margins in the Book of Ruth allow us the space to create a new midrash which listens in to the lives of its female protagonists. In reversioning the story of Naomi, I'm striving to not only hear what is said, but to engage with what is unsaid. It is perhaps useful here to define the term 'revisioning'. Adrienne Rich, in her work *When we dead awaken,* describes it as the "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a critical new direction… an act of survival".[39] It is also important to add a note of balance. While the aim of this thesis is to creatively reimagine the life of Naomi, it is not to create a metaphor of generic womanhood. My intent, rather, is to revision: to reimagine a life which might resonate with that of a woman at a similar stage and to uncover significance in the surreptitious and surprising way that fiction often achieves. As Heather Walton observes:

> 'Fiction affords me the liberty to attend to all the sorts of extraneous details which I consider significant but which would be judged indulgent if I were writing in another genre. A fictional style is accommodating and hospitable making space for all sorts of unexpected encounters, some of which may be of theological significance.'[40]

In the reimagining of Naomi's account, I aim to locate the story spatially, contextually, socially, geographically. I try to do this as authentically as possible in order to ground the character. My intention is to recreate a Naomi who is an identifiable protagonist rather than simply a metaphor who may be appropriated solely for the purposes of faith development.[41] Bochner, writing in Ellis's *Autoethnography: An overview,* describes the act of reframing stories within the process of autoethnography as 'making meaning out of the stuff of memory and experience'. He explores the concept that memory is always retelling itself to fit with our understanding of the past and the present. He observes that 'the past is always open to revision and so too are our stories of the past and what they mean now".[42] Although each of the main characters in the Book of Ruth is given an equal number of lines of direct speech, the essence of Naomi's story is missing.[43] The tale explicitly outlines Ruth's rise from grief to hope. But the rise of this middle-aged women from the pain of exile, bereavement and return is

perhaps too subtle for the post-modern reader to discern. By reframing and revisioning this story, we can perhaps understand Naomi's character more clearly.

1.4 The absent journey

Two journeys are mentioned in passing in the Book of Ruth. The first, the exile from Bethlehem, is described in two dense verses.

> And it happened in the days when the judges ruled that there was a famine in the land, and a man went from Bethlehem to sojourn in the plains of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. And the man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites from Bethlehem of Judah. And they came to the plains of Moab and they were there. (Ruth 1:1-2)[44]

The second, the decision to return to Bethlehem, is described in a third of one verse.

> And Naomi came back, and her daughter-in-law with her who was coming back from the plains of Moab. (Ruth 1:22)[45]

Rita Gross, writing in *Womanspirit Rising*, observes that the Hebrew words to describe exile (*galut*)[46] and homesickness carry different genders: exile is masculine while the longing to return home is female.[47] This is an interesting observation given the wider, post-exilic context within which the book is written. The focus, within the narrative and the language of the story, leans towards the female protagonists. Ruth, not put off by Naomi's bitterness in bereavement[48], pledges her allegiance to her mother-in-law and to her God. Then the text falls silent.[49] God does not rush in with a blessing. A kinsman does not appear on a donkey to bring them back to harvest in Bethlehem. In the echo of the divine silence, they set off home. Or as Trible describes it, they risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile, and the unknown.[50] The absence of a direct divine response leaves a gap in this story which is filled with the cosmic loneliness of a 'tipped over' faith.

Naomi's silence, and the silence of the text, falls between the two women after Ruth's pledge of allegiance and their arrival in Bethlehem

> And she saw that she was insisting on going with her, and she ceased speaking to her. And the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem, and it happened as they came to Bethlehem that the whole town was astir over them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" (Ruth 1:18-19)[51]

The simplicity and straightforwardness of the text belies what, for many travellers at the time, must have been an epic journey. The plains of Moab stretch to the East side of the Dead Sea, separated from the lands of Reuben and Gad by the Arnon river. There were two route options: south or north. The southern route led further into Moabite territory along the shores of the Dead Sea, through the enemy territory of Edom and then up the West side of the water, bearing east of Hebron until they would reach Bethlehem. The northern and shorter route would take four to five days of challenging walking up to the top of the Dead Sea to the east of Jericho before arriving in Bethlehem via Jerusalem. [52] The Book of Ruth omits the journey through the wilderness and across the River Jordan, despite their use as motifs elsewhere in the bible. Biblical bodies of water tend to suggest chaos and lurking monsters. Crossing the River Jordan was always a momentous event in scripture and in ancient near eastern culture. As a key crossing point for trade, war and exploration, each side had a sense of awe for the communities on each side of the river. The east bank, comprising of the plains of Moab where Moses reminded people of Israel of the Ten Commandments[53], was intersected by tributaries and tended to be more fertile; the west bank was more susceptible to famine.[54] It was the Jordan River which Rachel's husband crossed to meet his brother Esau. Perhaps Naomi and Ruth passed her grave on the way to Bethlehem.[55] Later, Rachel will be upheld as Ruth's uxorial role model.[56] It was after crossing the Jordan in order to reach the Promised Land that Joshua[57] laid four stones to symbolize the eternal cleansing of the people of Israel.[58] And it was in the Jordan where Jesus, in whom all the symbolism of cleaning, conversion and chaos coalesce, is baptised by John.[59] And yet, within the story of Ruth and Naomi, this crossing is absent.

According to the route laid out above, the two women will spend a substantial amount of time in the wilderness. There is no shortage of stories in the Old

Testament about adventures in deserts. The writers of the Jewish formation stories, as Rachel Held Evans writes, knew that:

> 'Nothing strips you down to your essential humanity and inherent dependency quite like submitting to the elements, surrendering to the wild. In the wilderness you find out what you are made of and who your friends are. You are forced to leave behind all nonessentials, to quiet yourself and listen.'[60]

Yet divine revelation does not come to Naomi and Ruth during the trek through the wilderness or the crossing of the Jordan. There is no stranger to wrestle, no pillar of smoke to follow or devil to engage in a battle of wits. If there were, the narrative would not be so discreet. We can presume, rather, that Naomi just walks, feeling in every step the indescribable sense of loss which comes from leaving a place of pain, the realisation that the life left will never be relived and the future holds uncertain familiarity. Although we know nothing about their travels in the wilderness, we do learn about her exit from it. Her story follows a familiar pattern. Many of those who travel through the wilderness are welcomed out on the other side. Moses, in his first departure to the desert, finds a burning bush before returning to his father-in-law, wife and children.[61] Jacob wrestles with an angel until, in his exhaustion, he sees Esau coming for him.[62] Jesus is tempted in the desert and the angels wait on him; Jesus preaches in the wilderness and the people come to him. After a period of imposed soul-searching, each is welcomed back to life. When Hagar returns from the desert the first time, it is into the heir-seeking arms of Abram.[63] On her second sojourn in the desert, Hagar does not leave and instead finds God there in the wild places.[64] When Naomi stumbles out of the desert into Bethlehem, stripped of all but her primal self, she is greeted by her women. And they see her.

> And the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem, and it happened as they came to Bethlehem that the whole town was astir over them, and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" (Ruth 1:19)[65]

The quest of this thesis is that we would see her too. And in seeing her that we would explore how faith develops after a journey through the wilderness.

As I have stated, it is unlike the writers of the Old Testament to remain silent

about a journey when something about the nature of the divine could be revealed. So, perhaps we can conclude two things about the delivery of this story: that the earliest audiences did not need reminding that this would have been an unenviable journey for two women to undertake alone; and that describing the journey in this story was not relevant for the patriarchal agenda of scripture.

Below, when I outline my autoethnographic writing process, I will focus on how the language of journey is crucial for understanding the protagonists' evolving identities. Commentators, including Havrelock and Caspi, note the significance of the subtle comparison within this story to other biblical journeys where a famine forced change, self-reflection and a new way of communicating with the divine. But in the Book of Ruth, those who journey are not men but women who are grieving and alienated from their community. Early listeners understood that behind the bucolic landscape a seismic shift is occurring. The one who journeys is not a man in search of a divine covenant or a promised land, but two women seeking survival. Havrelock and Caspi signal this change: 'By altering the position of male and female characters, the narrator makes a radical change in the nature of biblical journey stories while staying true to their form'.[66] There are similarities in the phrase used to describe the women starting out for Bethlehem and the moment when Abraham leads Isaac to the sacrificial altar.

> Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. (Genesis 22:6)
>
> And the two of them went until they came to Bethlehem. (Ruth 1:19)[67]

In Genesis, the two went on 'together'. In the book of Ruth, the sense of togetherness is absent. Perhaps Naomi's silence is not simply grief-laden resignation of her new situation but rather 'a silence born of frustration and separation.[68] Naomi's pain is communicated brusquely, officiously in many interpretations of the Book of Ruth. Fewell and Gunn posit that the silence which falls between the two women after Ruth's pledge of loyalty was entirely predictable. They suggest that the presence of Ruth the Moabite, the embodiment of their flight and her bereavement, has caused her 'resentment,

irritation [and] frustration.' Or perhaps, this dismissal of her pain is because, in the rush to learn from Ruth and admire Boaz, we have not lent our imagination to Naomi's suffering. We do not linger over her anguish.

The Hebrew word for widow, *almanah,* derives from the verb *alam which* means 'to be unable to speak, silent, bound'.[69] On one level, this silence is a result of her loss of place or voice in a patriarchal society. On another, muteness is the natural response to what Sara Horowitz calls 'a consistent movement of displacement'.[70] In other words, when everything changes beyond recognition, what is left to say? The first chapter of Ruth does not elaborate on the Naomi's grieving rituals. We do not know if she fasted or groaned, remained silent or threw ashes in her hair. We don't know if she mourned for one day or thirty, if she ate the bread of mourners or behaved as if she herself was dead. But we do know that Boaz commended Ruth for her *hesed* towards her mother-in-law.[71] This perhaps implies that, bereft of a community of mourners and comforters in her grief, Ruth and Orpah upheld the Israelite grieving rites. In the echo of her rage against YHWH, we hear the grief and the despair which threaten to rob her of herself.[72] Cynthia Ozick believes Naomi becomes superhuman in that moment of silence when she returns to Bethlehem to make restitution for Elimelech's exile.[73] 'She is transformed over-night. Under the crush of mourning and defencelessness, she becomes without warning or preparation, a woman of valour.'[74] It is difficult to imagine that these two newly bereaved, newly committed, very different women undertook such a dangerous journey in silence.

The quest to keep the faith during the journey through grief is as old as it is contemporary. Alain Emerson, in his memoir, *Luminous Dark,* tries to reconcile his life-long faith with the darkness of his grief at losing his young wife. Emerson systematically marshals the reader along a clear path from protest to pathos, from silence to reorientation. He advocates three pairs of walking companions: journey and friends, vulnerability and courage and language and liturgy.[75] This framing is helpful and yet in my experience the path through grief is not smooth. Exploring pain takes a circuitous route along paths which once seemed familiar and rivers swollen with tears. When Naomi reaches her destination, the bitterness from all that has gone before has made her almost unrecognisable to

herself. But the women who greet her recognise Naomi the friend, Naomi of Bethlehem. They see her beneath the layers of grief. The appearance of the women at the moment of Naomi's arrival and at the moment in which they bless her grandson imply that solitary grief brings no healing.[76]

Section two: Creative processes

2.1 Autoethnography: Reimagining Naomi in life writing

The submission of this thesis coincides with the tenth winter since my mother died. It is a year or two less since I first heard Heather Walton retell the stories of Genesis at the church I uncomfortably attended and began to consider how I could add ballast to my instinctive writing practice. I do not relish method. But that does not mean my writing was haphazard. This is what I knew ten years ago, but could not frame in an academic context:

- that I write only after a long period of thinking while gardening, walking, baking, bathing children, hoovering;
- that I write after a long period of curiosity: of listening, researching, analysing contemporary culture and biblical texts;
- that I puzzle together the pieces of a storied jigsaw – the pathos and the humour, the fall and the rise, the memory and the action – carefully and precisely;
- that I write only the truth which I'm ready to reveal, allowing myself permission to fictionalise for the benefit of the retelling and owning the results of that amalgamation as subjective, personal and almost never absolute;
- that, despite my quavering public speaking voice, I write pieces which are performative;
- that I cannot avoid writing honestly about the faith I sense, even when that faith seems indistinct and out of reach both to me and to the audience.

While I had an instinct that I could write, albeit in a niche genre for an unidentifiable audience, I could not qualify what it is that made my writing any more distinctive than the many personal stories which flood our online and offline lives. The process and resources of study opened up many ways through which I could start to understand the creation of my own story and my compulsion to tell it.[77] Some of the writing within the creative element of this

thesis were informed by theories about ritual, journeying and feminist theology. But I explored the structure of the writing itself only after completing the first draft version. This return to writing methodologies, apart from being a requirement of the degree, was to check it with my original desire. Did it have ballast? Or as Denzin, quoted and adapted by Heather Walton, might ask: is it 'good enough to trust; does it show interpretative sufficiency and representational adequacy, and aspire to authenticity'?[78] After rigorous research on the Book of Ruth, my aim was to create a piece of fictional writing which resonates with the reader regardless of whether they were familiar with the story. The creative thesis combines two elements: a revisioning of Naomi's account and autoethnographic writing. I intertwine episodes of Naomi's story with similar or resonant autobiographical stories around themes of home, loss, grief and return. By interweaving the reimagined with the personal, I hope I have created a piece of writing which is aesthetic and evocative.[79]

I found Steven Aisthorpe's research on people of faith who have left institutional religion helpful in the autoethnographic technique of critical analysis and life writing. Aisthorpe, a mission development officer for the Church of Scotland, writes, 'it should come as no surprise that as "people of the book: we are a journeying people'.[80] He describes the faith stories of his research participants as 'travel journals, interspersed with significant encounters and events, choices and challenges.'[81] His observation holds particular resonance for me. During the period of this research and life writing, I have returned to Northern Ireland several times to sift through boxes of the photographs, school reports, scrapbooks and newspaper clippings which my mum kept to chart the life of our family. That process of deciding which of these souvenirs still tells our family story is very similar to the process of choosing the life stories which reflect my journey of faith so far. There have been moments of intensity and moments of small revelations in the midst of great ordinariness. The life writing process has been a constant critiquing of the 'value' of those moments in terms of how they shape the greater path of my faith development. Which moments encapsulate the story of leaving the faith of the first half of life (as Richard Rohr might describe it) and which point towards the second 'Naomi-inspired' half? [82] The process has been a constant act of listening to hear both Naomi's voice and the episodes which, as Aisthorpe observes, 'can [now] be understood and

appreciated when viewed as part of a unified pilgrimage'.[83] Gleaning from his extensive research with those whom he describes as 'the invisible church' in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Aisthorpe suggests that although the journey through life may seem 'well-defined and intelligible in retrospect… the next step often appears indistinct and perplexing'.[84] Similarly, sometimes in the process of this piece of life writing, the next step didn't appear at all. There was a fine balance between remembering a moment in time, prompted by the exegesis and interpretation of the Book of Ruth, and forcing that story to meet the aims of the creative element of this work. Therefore, it felt important to allow those moments to tell their own stories in order to 'convey the complexity and ambiguity of our religious selves'.[85]

The purpose of this combination of autoethnography with life writing is to disrupt the reader's expectations. That disruption is not intended to divert but rather to more deeply engage the reader in faith-based application. Heather Walton, in her book *Writing methods in theological reflections*, describes autoethnography as 'a way of using personal experience to investigate a particular issue or concern that has wider cultural or religious experience'. It is a means of relating the outcomes of rigorous research in such a way that the reader will not simply consume (or ignore) the objective findings but will engage with its story-telling nature in their own lives. The autoethnographic discipline is one which holds as important not just the verifiability the research but the way in which the story of that research will impact the reader.[86] Of further significance to this piece of work is Bochner's observation that traditional research tends to be written in a 'father tongue' which prioritises objectivity over engagement and distances the writer from the reader. A 'mother tongue' might encourage research to become intertwined with emotion and personal experience.[87] Bochner's term 'mother tongue' resonates with one aspect of French philosopher Luce Irigaray's work. Her concept of 'parler femme' or 'speaking as woman' describes the shaping of women's experience into a linguistic form. Rather than simply re-imagining the stories from a feminine perspective, Irigaray pushes the narrative beyond the framework of patriarchal, logic-driven expectations into an innovative expression which is refreshing, engaging and disruptive.[88]

The work of weaving my story together with Naomi's has been challenging and time consuming. In my attempts to not over-engineer a co-joined account, there will be gaps in the telling. Walton suggests that 'this may be a strategic move… to fracture our understanding'.[89] It will be for the reader to decide whether the stories feed each other, detract from each other or become a distraction. Walton observes that performance autoethnography 'mimes dominant narratives in order to undermine them'.[90] Five characters appear in the Book of Ruth: Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, Orpah and the kinsman. Of the three more dominant characters (Ruth, Boaz and Naomi), two (Ruth and Boaz) receive disproportionately more interpretation than the third (Naomi) by theologians and commentators. My interpretation of Naomi's story may unsettle the reader. That has been a deliberate device, used to overthrow the assumption that female biblical characters are meek and obliging. Naomi has raged at Shaddai and has become bitter. We must assume that that anger has not come from nothing.

> And she said, "Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for Shaddai has dealt great bitterness to me. I went out full and empty did the LORD bring me back. Why should you call me Naomi when the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me harm? (Ruth 1:20–21)[91]

The process of writing and researching was not linear. I began by reading and re-reading the Book of Ruth with particular interest in what the text had to say about the journey to Bethlehem and Naomi's outburst on arrival. I then followed the exegetical trail of breadcrumbs dropped along the path of the story pointing back towards older tales. Where the text presented clues about the lives of women in the Bible, I researched biblical archaeology, mourning traditions and domestic relationships for more insight. The exegesis and narrative gaps in the text, specifically in chapters 1 and 2, signpost the curious reader towards ritual, biblical archaeology, revisioning, nomadic theories and feminist theologies. Finally, I responded with chunks of life writing centred about my faith identity which seemed, to my surprise, to be evolving. Each time that process of reading, exegesis, research and life writing came to a pause, I started the cycle again. I will attempt to explain that cyclical process, by highlighting three moments in the Book of Ruth: the journey, the arrival, and Naomi's holy outburst.

2.2 Creating a framework

The creative outworking of this thesis uses autoethnography and reversioning in order to explore a hermeneutics of faith recovery. In my work, both methods rely on the examination and reframing of biblical and personal history in order to reconstruct a story of faith. Feminist theologians from Schüssler Fiorenza to Sherwood strive to restore the place of women in the old, old stories and to restore 'the history of Christian beginnings to women'.[92] Indeed, a rich dialogue with the tradition and history of the material – be it biblical or personal – strips the stories of their patriarchal context and brings those who are on the edges into the middle of the story.[93] By dialoguing with the text, and by identifying the absences within, we create new stories of faith which are not just interesting but meaningful.[94]

Carol Meyers's research into the lives of everyday women in ancient Israel uncovered archaeological evidence of domestic religion integrated into daily tasks such as baking, weaving and mourning rituals.[95] This provided touching points for both the ancient near eastern and contemporary characters who we meet in the creative sections. This synchronicity of experience and ritual across centuries and cultures was a means through which I could correlate Naomi's experience with my own. I will return to biblical archaeology in more depth later in this thesis.

Michelle Herman's exploration of the historicity of life stories in her paper Truth, Truthiness, Memory and Bald-faced Lies also provides helpful framing.[96] Her observations about the intermingling of fact and fiction as an artful exposition of what was once lived are noteworthy and her lyrical interpretations of personal history are an example of how history-telling might become the frame through which deconstruction and reconstruction can be represented.

Another aspect which provided a framework for the creative element was Nicola Slee's research into the faith lives of women and girls. Her research highlights the importance of retelling our history in the process of faith development. Slee

pays particular attention to liminal spaces such as those most pertinent to this work: death and motherhood. Noelia Molina's essay in *Faith Lives of Women and Girls* identifies how the transition to motherhood through the lens of authentic meaning-making can open the door to recognize the distinct role that spirituality plays in the crisis and in the transformation that occurs in the event of becoming a mother. The ordinary moments in the women's and girls' lives, which form significant moments in their personal history, are Slee acknowledges, "worthy of painstaking study… revelatory of God".[97]

Although my intention is to retell a Naomi who is more accessible to a contemporary audience, there has been merit in listening in to the original language in which this story was written. During the course of this research, I discovered that scholars such as Alter and Zornberg used transliteration of the text in order to demonstrate the tradition, continuity and consistency of language from one Bible story to another. Hearing, or reading, echoes of Naomi's cry in Job's lament enabled me to identify with the intensity, divinity and humanity of their despair. By emphasising repetitions in the language, these scholars not only bring to life and validate emotions which we perhaps overlook in the English translation. The transliteration also ensures, as Rosi Braidotti maintains, that we 'bridge the gap between the ancient document… and the 'real world'.[98] Thus, by demonstrating the internal cross-referencing of the Hebrew Bible, I hope to persuade the reader of the importance of creating a conversation between old stories of faith and newly constructed faith experiences.

Another important aspect of the framework is the conceptualisation of the sense of journey. For that, I borrow from Rosi Braidotti's nomadic theory. In brief, Braidotti posits that a nomadic experience is at the core of many biblical texts; that the nomadic metaphor offers recognition to the sense of not-belonging; and the concept of movement towards or beyond a liminal space.[99] Although journeying motifs have perhaps become cliched beyond usefulness, nomadic theory offers a positive, feminist means of interpreting trauma and change.

Furthermore, Braidotti's observation that 'becoming nomad' is an active choice, born from the desire to break free from conventional structures of

identification, opened up the possibility of enrichening the reversioned character of Naomi. [100] Recreating a more dynamic Naomi in turn influences the autoethnographic contribution and may, by extension, offer an opportunity for reinvention and transformation through the lens of faith.

These elements – the implications of the historical context on contemporary faith development, the dynamic use of the journey metaphor and the linguistic echoes which resonant throughout stories of faith – provided a framework within which I aimed to respond creatively and contemporaneously to the character of Naomi.

2.3 Recreating the journey

> And Naomi came back, and her daughter-in-law with her who was coming back from the plains of Moab. And they had come to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. (Ruth 1:22)[101]

The language in the Book of Ruth is in constant motion and throughout the story we are updated on the protagonists' locations both literally and metaphorically. At first sojourning, Ephraim's family then dwell for ten years on the Plains of Moab before Naomi goes back to Bethlehem. Avivah Zornberg in her commentary on Ruth states that the verbs which mean to return (*vatashov* and *lashuv*) are used eleven times in the first chapter. Returning is not a one-off decision; returning home, she suggests, takes many steps: 'a journey with many acts of turning on the way'.[102] Later, in Ruth 1:21, Naomi describes the return as emptier than her first journey. Then she 'walked full' (*ani mele'ah halakhti*), perhaps pregnant 'filled with seed', but we never meet that child.[103] Zornberg brilliantly observes how the text mimics the movement of the soul along that road from the sorrow of the departure, via the longing for arrival, the tension between nostalgia and utopia, until eventually setting foot on the homeland. [104] The verb used to describe their travel suggests that both Naomi and Ruth go back to Judah, despite the fact the Ruth has never been there before, re-enacting, as Alter claims 'Abraham's long trek from the East to Canaan'.[105] Zornberg's exegesis of the text, like Alter's, finds similarities in the verb used to describe Naomi and Ruth's return (*vetelakhna* – they went) and Abraham's (*lekh*

lekjha – go forth).[106] Cynthia Ozick describes Ruth as a female Abraham, discovering monotheism for herself.[107] This revisioning of the patriarchal journey is one of many instances in the Book of Ruth which echoes earlier biblical stories. In many ways, this is already a tale which has been adapted for its time. It has been handed down, told and retold, layering story upon story. As we reimagine the journey of Ruth and Naomi, we might wonder if these characters would have passed Rachel's tomb on their way to Bethlehem. Rachel, the mother of exiled and slain children of Israel may have known something of Naomi's loss. And we might wonder if, as they journeyed, they talked about Tamar, a foreigner, who provoked an older man[108] into fulfilling his obligations to her.[109] Both are heralded at the end of the book as pre-cursors to Ruth (Ruth 4:11). Adrienne Rich, in her essay "When we dead awaken", describes revisioning as an act of looking back at an old text with fresh eyes in order to glean new life from it. She says, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us".[110]

I've been as much influenced by the Midrashic and biblical retellings of the story of Ruth and Naomi as I have by more contemporary writers.[111] Richard Fein's poem, *Orpah*[112] reimagines the Israelite life which Naomi might have imposed upon her daughters-in-law in Moab and to which she and Naomi will return. The barely punctuated checklist of rituals gives great insight into the life of the Israelite woman. But I am most endeared to Marge Piercy's poem, "The Book of Naomi and Ruth", not just for her acknowledgement that this tale is about two women rather than one but also for the line which reimagines their journey towards a newly defined identity:

> 'At the season of first fruits, we recall
> two travelers, co-conspirators, scavengers
> making do with leftovers and mill ends…' [113]

Earlier, I described how the journey motif is built into the syntax and vocabulary of the text. A greater understanding of nomadic theory helped reveal how faith identities within the story progress and change. Nomadic theory distinguishes itself from feminist theory by its emphasis on the search for change and affirmation rather than on the stuckness formed by trauma and loss.[114] According

to Anne-Mareike Schol-Wetter, 'Nomadic theory's outlook is essentially positive, embracing change and actively seeking transformation—of self, of oppressive political and social systems, and of thought patterns stuck in the old dialects between 'us' and 'them''.[115] The missing journey from the plains of Moab to Bethlehem gives space to imagine the movement of the two women across physical, emotional and societal landscape. Nomadic theory allows the reader to understand how they can read beyond the conventional construct of a fixed ("Israelite") identity and ultimately learn to reinvent themselves.[116] The story of two women embarking on a treacherous journey without a male chaperone is very unusual within the biblical context. The journey genre is not one which often lends itself to an all-female cast. However, in the epic female road trip movie of the 1990s, years of abuse at the hands of men sends the protagonists of *Thelma and Louise*[117] on a journey from Oklahoma to Mexico. Their snap decision to leave propels them into a different world where gender roles (and the rule of law) no longer control their lives. With no male action hero, the women have to make their own story: they take their security and their destiny into their own hands. For Thelma, it is an epiphanic awakening.

> Something has changed inside me and I couldn't go back, I couldn't. I feel awake, wide awake. I don't remember ever feeling this awake. Everything looks different. Do you feel like that too? Like you've got something to look forward to?[118]

Just as Ruth and Naomi reinterpret the patriarchal journey narrative, *Thelma and Louise* escapes the constraints of gender, class, time and place. 'Thelma and Louise transcends the genre; it's about transformation and liberation that is at once intensely personal and deeply political.'[119] Unlike Thelma and Louise, Naomi can only go back *because* something has changed inside of her. Her fulness has turned to barrenness, her family of six has shrunk to two and Shaddai whom she has obeyed diligently, has struck out unfairly against her. While the Midrashic storytellers say that an angel of God and the Targum says that peddlers making their rounds from city to city told Naomi that the harvest in Bethlehem was plentiful, we are given no hint within Ruth chapter one that she has had any news from Bethlehem since she left.[120] We may assume that she does not know if her family are alive, if her family home still stands or if the

shame of their departure still hangs over the family name.[121] And yet something has moved her to return.

The midrash Megillat Ruth suggests that Naomi has anticipated that her return will not be victorious. When she is greeted by the women of Bethlehem, she responds:

> *Lama tikrena li Naomi, vehashem ana vi, ve Shaddai hera li.*
>
> Why should you call me Naomi when the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me harm? (Ruth 1:21)[122]

Shame is embedded here within the Hebrew phrase *ana vi,* which is interpreted by Ibn Ezra as 'God as borne witness against me'. Job, who also feels the bitterness at the unjust hand of God, uses the same noun *onyi* to describe his incomprehension at God's quarrel with him.[123]

> *Seva kalon u-reeh onyi.*
>
> 'I am filled with shame'. (Job 10:15)

Zornberg says the reason for this shaming was perhaps to do with Elimelech's leaving in the first place. According to the Midrash Ruth Megillat, he was a wealthy man: a feeder, a potential benefactor in times of need. It suggests that he left Israel for Moab because of the narrowness of his vision (*tzarut ha'ayin*), literally translated as stingy, resentful, grudging to the poor. When famine strikes Bethlehem, he imagines that he will be surrounded by beggars. He may be forced to give more than he wanted to give. The midrash pictures his existential fear of being eaten alive.[124]

Since the application of nomadic theory to ancient biblical texts allows the characters to keep becoming, there is scope to imagine that Naomi's journey home may have been emotionally complicated. The Book of Ruth moves Naomi from shame to dignity; it moves Ruth from a dependent outsider to an independent provider. The women greet the pair on arrival and keep folding this

new Naomi into their community; Ruth keeps finding new ways create a life for herself and Naomi leaves Mara behind. Her name becomes 'grandmother', fore runner of King David. The story itself becomes one which is always unfolding; modeling how one might move from shame to dignity, from a conventional faith to one which is more liberating. During the course of this short, but intense story, we see how Ruth and Naomi turn loss into empowerment. More than simply enabling us to re-imagine the women more vibrantly, nomadic theory helps bridge the gap between ancient stories and 'the real world'.[125] In her essay, *My mother was a wandering Aramean*, Anne-Mareike Schol-Wetter observes:

> "the admittedly ancient biblical texts have proven surprisingly well suited for interactions with the present … as a virtually inexhaustible source of literary framings and figurations, which resonate uncannily well with some of the challenges facing us in the early twenty-first century."[126]

I found it striking that the journey of the Book of Ruth, and the nomadic evolution of the two women, ends so abruptly. Francine Klagsbrun is one of several commentators who wonder what happens next in this intriguing relationship. While the end of chapter three draws together some of the key themes of the book relating to emptiness, belonging and security we do not hear again directly from Naomi and Ruth. The chapter ends with the following verse:

> "Stay my daughter, till you know how the matter will fall out, for the man will not rest if he does not settle the matter today." (Ruth 3:18)[127]

Klagsbrun observes that the women fall silent in chapter four. "We hear no more dialogue between them. Perhaps if we did we might discover it to be less idyllic than before".[128] This book does not promise a tidy ending and neither, in my revisioning, can I. This sense of an un-ending in autoethnographic writing was significant to me. The sermons, epilogues and 'Good News' services of my childhood excelled at interweaving biblical narrative with life stories. The resultant retelling always had a clearly defined purpose. The ending was always tidy and predictable. The congregation was left in no doubt about its evangelical and eschatological message. Through exegesis of this section of the Book of

Ruth, the application of nomadic theory and personal reflection, I have discovered that there is room to move and grow within the unfinished story.

2.4 Reimagining the arrival

> And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" (Ruth 1:19)[129]

Three women leave the plains of Moab: Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. But only two women arrive in the town of Bethlehem. Orpah, in returning to her mother's house, has done the right thing. Having married a foreigner, she has nonetheless buried her husband and grieved with her mother-in-law in accordance with Israelite rites and rituals with great kindness. She has obeyed Naomi's advice. She has understood the precariousness of the situation without a husband or son to support her, and has returned to her mother's house. Orpah, Cynthia Ozick observes -- perhaps unkindly -- is no one's heroine. She is unremarkable, reliable, ordinary: history's backdrop.[130] The start of the following verses which describes her sister-in-law's response reads like a sigh in any mother's sorry tale about her children: "But Ruth…".[131] Robert Alter's exegesis of Ruth's pledge to Naomi uncovers an interesting nuance. The verb 'to lodge' (lun) means to spend the night while traveling.[132] This is the opposite of what Naomi (1:9) had encouraged Ruth and Orpah to find: a settled place. But Ruth is not committing to settling down, she is not expecting a life of stasis. Ruth is committing to cross the Jordan, brave the wilderness with Naomi and stay with her when the night closes in. When they come to whatever awaits them in Bethlehem, she promises, the journey will not be over and she will still lodge (*lun*) with her there. We underestimate the magnitude of this commitment in the biblical context. In a world where survival is dependent on husbands and sons, and on the brink of a journey which will likely be difficult and dangerous, one woman has chosen to stick alongside another woman. Trible says, 'There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel'; Naomi is entirely overwhelmed and silenced by it.[133]

The women commit to travel together and then to lodge together while they work out how they will survive without male benefactors. Naomi stuns Bethlehem with her return. *Hazot Naomi?* The women wonder how this husk of a

woman (*va-tishaer)*, the residue from a meal sacrifice, the leftovers without husband, children or property can be the wealthy woman who left.[134] She names herself 'Mara', after the river which was too bitter to drink until Moses performs a miracle.[135] We see the Naomi of old, now barely recognised by her friends. We see Naomi of the present, bitter and worn out. And we see hope for her future, the miracle which might come to Mara if God will only hear out her anger.

2.5 Reimagining ancient Israel

The story of Ruth and Naomi is infused with everyday life, creating an imaginary world as vital as our lived one: birthing and mourning, harvesting and breadmaking, courting and negotiating, making a home and selling property. The community of women frame Naomi's return and reintegration.[136] Their role in the story symbolises the everyday routine and ritual of life in Bethlehem. There is some difficulty commenting with accuracy on women's lives in ancient Israelite culture. What data there is has been recorded in a patriarchal culture with little awareness or regard for women's religious culture and without direct input from women. Within the context of this work, it was important to try to uncover the life of a typical ancient Israelite woman: her work, family, home, rituals and her role in the community. For this, I leaned heavily on Carol Meyers' extensive work in biblical archaeology and Ann Jeffers' research on ritual.[137] Meyers is an archaeologist specialising in Biblical antiquity and Iron Age. She is interested in the home life of Israelites and the power dynamic between genders and communities. Jeffers views ritual as a means of 'world-making'.[138] Her work proposes that women held together the ritual life of the community.[139]

In the Hebrew Bible, named men outnumber named women by a factor of about twelve to one. Those women who are named tend to be 'exceptional'.[140] The omission of the daily lives of unexceptional women is not simply due to their gender but also to the agenda of the text.[141] The Hebrew Bible largely concentrates itself with national collective institutions and events. While the theology of the Book of Ruth centres on the interpretation of the Torah and the polemic against intermarriage, the national agenda is, unusually, not at the forefront. Meyers believes that household archaeology and the reconstruction of gendered activities, mitigates cultural and male biases and 'overcome[s] the invisibility of women in traditional forms of research'.[142] Her work is also informed by feminist anthropologists whose focus is to discover the 'active roles women hold/have held in their communities'.[143] Feminist anthropology shows that while women's roles 'as actors and agents may differ from those of men [they] are no less significant'.[144]

Meyers and Jeffers bring to life the probable day-to-day rites and routines of the inhabitants of a nonurban settlement like Bethlehem. Meyers paints a picture of a subsistence farming community working the inhospitable land to harvest whatever will grow on terraced hillsides with unpredictable rainfall. She describes the all-community effort to gather in the harvest, store the grains and look after the more deprived households. Life expectancy in the Iron and Bronze Ages was about 30 years and people dwelt in intergenerational family units. While studies seem to show that household duties were undertaken by all residents, it was the women who generally undertook the preparation of bread.[145] This process had several steps. These included: soaking the grain in order to separate it from the husk; grinding; kneading; and then baking the bread in communal ovens. In the process of the breadmaking the women grew relationships, built community and integrated rituals. Therefore, when misfortune befell a household, it was the women who provided support. 'The social fabric of Israelite settlements, often woven by women… contributed to the survival of struggling households.'[146] Women kept each other alive.

Household religion was central to most people's religious experience due to a lack of temples in Judah and Israel in the Bronze and Iron Age.[147] Shrines and cult corners were set up in the households of village leaders. Religion was borne through practical action and therefore it is likely that household objects and implements (such as burners, offering jugs and grain grinders) were imbued with cultic significance.[148] A piece of bread dough (*terumah*) was offered to God before the rest was baked in order to secure a blessing on the household. Meyers comes to the conclusion that women, through the integration of religion to their daily routines and work, were the 'theologians who gave voice to some of household and family religion's most constitutive beliefs'.[149] Women, rather than men, held the 'leadership role' in household religion.[150] An understanding of the routines and rituals of the life of an everyday ancient Israelite was imperative for my re-imagining Naomi's role in the book. Anderson and Foley make a distinct link between storytelling and ritual-making which is useful here, saying 'Ritual shapes our stories, and our instinct to perceive life as a narrative urges us to rehearse that narrative through our bodies'.[151] Therefore, by understanding a little of the ritual and the humanity which underpins the stories of the Hebrew

bible, we are more likely to 'fashion our human narratives… in the light of [the divine] presence'.[152]

In the revisioning of the story of Naomi, I have re-imagined her journey from the plains of Moab, her arrival in Bethlehem and the routines which might have structured her daily life. Alicia Ostriker suggests that stories are re-visioned so that women are re-inserted into the heart of them, the narrative changes significantly in four ways: female silence is given a voice; the male-gendered universal is highlighted; something new is found in the text; and the female 'poet' replays the tragedy as farce.[153] In order to reinsert Naomi in the heart of the Book of Ruth, I needed to understand the daily context of life in ancient Bethlehem and the legal structures which were established to support the widow and the stranger. While the two women have formed a new family unit, they remain vulnerable within a patriarchal society without a male advocate. We find, within the context of the constantly moving narrative, an evolving legal situation. Levirate law mandated in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 does not apply to the story of Ruth and Naomi[154] because, as Fewell and Gunn point out, levirate law applied to brothers who live together. Further, levirate law does not include the redemption of property.[155] The redemption of property mandate to protect those who have become impoverished (Leviticus 25:25) does not stipulate marriage to the deceased property owner's widow.[156] In the account of Zelophehad and his daughters, we learn that women may inherit land.[157] Naomi, therefore rightfully owns the land but, we must assume, cannot produce enough food quickly. It is Ruth who suggests to Boaz that the legal concept of levirate obligation should be broadened to apply to distant relatives. Ruth teaches Boaz a lesson in the humanitarian interpretation of the law, which he readily accepts.[158] She also creates a new reality: by naming Boaz a 'redeemer', Ruth makes him one.

It may be that Boaz is, in fact, enacting a widow-inheritance custom which connects property redemption with remarriage. But this legislation does not carry the obligation of naming offspring for their deceased father. But by designating the legal transaction under the terms of levirate law, the grandson presented at the end of the book belongs to Naomi.[159] In the Book of Ruth, even

the law is re-imagined. In my revisioning of their story, this research into the legal structures shapes the relationships between the Ruth and Naomi, between the women and Boaz, and between Naomi and her family home. It also raises contemporary questions about inheritance and my connection with home and the land.

2.6 Reimagining Naomi's outburst

> Why should you call me Naomi when the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me harm? (Ruth 1:21)[160]

Naomi is hard pressed on every side. She has been abandoned through death by her husband and boys. She believes she was unfairly struck down by the God of her tradition, culture and homeland. Naomi has walked through the valley of the shadow of death and she has been lonely and afraid. For over a decade, she has lived on the edge of a community hostile to the ancient Israelites and worshipers of Moabite gods: Chemosh, the god of sun and war, and Ashtar, the mother goddess.[161] She has heard that YHWH has remembered the fields of Judah like he used to remember the matriarchs and perhaps that divine remembering has been enough to send her home.[162] Her foreign daughter-in-law has chosen to return with her to Bethlehem. She has cast her lot with an Israelite god who is seemingly no less capricious than the Moabite ones. There is nothing to commend the divine. Naomi has kept her side of the bargain after all these years in foreign fields. She has continued to weave cultic practice into daily life, evidenced in the faithfulness of her daughters-in-law. Orpah and Ruth have carried out the Israelite rituals in death and bereavement. Nevertheless the hand of the Almighty has come out against her. Naomi imagines herself standing trial in a cosmic courtroom with God both the witness for the prosecution and the judge.[163] Believing she has been wrongly singled out, she takes God to task.

Fewell and Gunn, in *Compromising Redemption*, read Naomi as a bitter woman, looking for retribution from someone (divine or human) for her losses. According to Alter, the text is highly subjective.[164] Naomi *feels* that this is what happens

when God is in charge of sifting the wheat from the chaff. This is what happens when God picks on someone not God's own size. The Almighty has dealt evilly with her.[165] This is what happens when Shaddai, the goddess of fertility and fullness takes against someone whose womb is too old to matter.[166]

Like Job, Naomi is sure that God can stop the pain and loss in a heartbeat. Like Job, Naomi gets no answer. Barbara Brown Taylor observes that God's silence hurts Job more than the loss of his children. Job's wife suggests that he 'curse God and die', but Job will not be silenced. 'He will deal with God or he will deal with no one [and] he will fill the air with his own furious poetry'.[167] But while there are clear parallels between Naomi's cry to God and Job's, their stories unravel differently. God does not question Naomi's place in the cosmos. God does not reveal Godself to her or promise her the prosperous renewal of family, spouse, land and livelihood. Rather, in the Book of Ruth, God appears in community in what Ellen Davis describes as the perpetual exchange of *hesed* from friend and foreigner alike.[168] Naomi curses God but does not die. Rather, this cry of pain and cry for help is the next step through the grieving process. 'Her outcry against God, with its Jobian echoes reflects the psychological necessity of publicly acknowledging private grief.'[169] Patricia Karlin-Neumann, in her essay *The Journey towards life*¸ observes that Naomi has suffered bereavement alone. On the death of her husband and her sons, she may have bitterly remembered the traditional mourners' consolation. "May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jersualem".[170] In a foreign land, with two Moabite daughters-in-law, she was left with "no community, no comforters, and only fury at God".[171] Her accusation against the Almighty within earshot of the women of Bethlehem is her first step towards restoration.

> 'For Naomi, the way back to life, vitality and restoration cannot be directly through faith because her estrangement from God is so critical to her understanding of herself as Mara. Instead it is through human acts that she is ultimately restored.'[172]
> (Patricia Karlin-Neumann, Reading Ruth, 127)

The verse which follows Naomi's despair against Shaddai in response to the women's welcome, re-situates Naomi within the community.

> And they had come to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. (Ruth 1:22)[173]

The barley harvest is ready and the community will need to work together to gather it in and prepare it as food. Famine in the Hebrew Bible was an indicator of God's displeasure with people (1 Kings 8:37-39). Since Naomi's departure to Moab, something has changed in the life of the community in Bethlehem. The relationship between the people and the land has been restored and God has blessed them with rain and harvest. God – YHWH , Shaddai, the Almighty, the LORD, goddess of fertility – is '… found in the fields bursting with life and the kindness displayed by people'.[174] The Hebrew word *hesed* is often translated – and to my mind under-translated – as loving kindness. Zornberg, in the comprehensive commentary *Reading Ruth* outlines two key areas where the word *hesed* is used in the Hebrew bible. Loving kindness, it transpires, is worked out through diligent, generous action. That action often relates to the giving and receiving of food, and one's compassion for those in mourning.

> May the LORD do kindness with you as you have done with the dead and with me.[175] (Ruth 1:8)

On the latter, Zornberg's observes two ways in which a mourner could do *hesed* with the living and the dead.[176] The midrash Ruth Rabba describes doing *hesed* with the dead as preparing the shrouds. Doing *hesed* with the living, in the case of Ruth and Orpah, was the abdication of their marriage rights to money on the death of their husbands.[177] Doing *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible often related to sharing food, a practical outworking of what Zornberg describes as a 'movement outward of life and goodness'.[178] How interesting that a story designed to focus on generosity beyond the Torah should be based in Bethlehem (the House of Bread) and set against the context of famine and harvest. And yet, I found this connection between *hesed* and food entirely unsurprising as I remembered how the community of church women among whom I had grown up, showed love to each other through baking. I have inherited their 'compassion through fruit cake' as one of my key means of loving action.

2.7 Identifying with Naomi

I found the practice of writing autoethnographically to be a circular process which involved rigorous analysis of exegesis, ritual theory, biblical archaeology, nomadic theory and feminist theology before the creative reworking of the story of Naomi. My aim, however, was not to create a metaphorical Naomi. Rather, I have attempted to reimagine her as a wife, mother, ancient Israelite, immigrant, emigrant, widow, mother-in-law, dependent and woman of faith. I'm trying to reimagine a life which might resonate with the faith development of a 21st century middle-aged, white woman. I intended to locate her character as authentically as possible contextually, socially, geographically and theologically. In order to encourage readers to engage imaginatively with the text and to examine their own shifting faith identity, I have layered the story of Naomi with my own story. I have written both stories in the first person and interweave them, perhaps creating uncertainty as to which life is being written. The Book of Ruth recalls the stories Lot's daughters, Tamar, Rachel and Leah. It reaches forward to the psalmist David, right through the genealogy of the New Testament to the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. Here we find a canonical narrative theology which invites the reader to enfold their own story into its embrace.[179] The aim of this work, with this account of Naomi intertwined with my own is that 'readers… [will] use what they learn there to reflect on, understand and cope with their own lives'.[180] But my intention is not only that readers might find their place in the sacred drama.[181] It is my hope that, rather than simply trying to fit into a pre-ordained canonical narrative, women for whom religion has lost its relevance would begin to construct their own stories of faith. By bringing the truth of our own stories into 'into conversation with the divine story', we find the freedom to 'challenge and affirm aspects of the faith [we] have inherited'.[182] In doing so we might discover a faith and community which is 'more appropriate for our own times than those we have inherited.'[183]

Section three:
Naomi and Me: faithfully retelling our stories.

I wonder if remembering is like a slide show. The slide ricochets out of the cassette and bursts, enlarged, against the wall. The darker the room, the clearer the image.
There are moments which were so unexpected in an ordinary life. Shards of memories catch the light. They wake us up to ourselves. They remind us that we are not invisible.

There were no carrots. There was no cream, no bulbs of garlic, no chicken or courgettes. There was not even any celery. I went to four supermarkets that night, from discount food to luxury goods. It didn't matter how much money I had to spend: the shelves stretched out bare all the way to the end. There was no flour. All of a sudden, the nation of pan loaf sandwich makers had become bakers, adept at using plain and wholemeal, spelt and rye. Each long and empty aisle bore witness to a panic which birthed greed and a betrayal of each other.

In my working life, I write about global hunger. I write about inequality and injustice, about failed harvests and foiled access to markets. I write about bloated bellies and begging eyes and the indignity of scarcity. At home I emotionally blackmail my children about the kids in their class who won't sit down to a hot dinner. In the church of my childhood, we played at being hungry with the annual Tearfund lunch. You don't need to be in Glasgow for very long before you see the effects of generations of deprivation. Hunger etches its way into people's lives, hollowing out their bellies and their dignity. But what I knew was entirely academic.

What I didn't know until that moment was the fear. I walked through each shop in a daze that night wondering what I would feed my children and which might take us first: the virus or starvation. All the time knowing, with the rational side

of my brain, that I had only come in for milk and that we had cupboards full of food at home. For now. What would happen in the next week when our shelves grew bare? And the week after that? Dear God, would we have to eat the quinoa? And I started to realise that although I had never been hungry and although we had never before faced a global pandemic, that I knew the shape of this fear as well as I know the rise and fall of the Irish Sea. I know this fear of losing all that I know, all that I love, all that holds me together. It feels very much like grief. In the days that followed, I began to dream about running away. I dreamed about the beach where my mother took us as children. Sitting with our backs against the black rocks, looking out to the grey-green sea and shivering with our sandy sandwiches. I could feel the salt against my lips and in my eyelashes; the whip of the seahorses and the yellow froth spat out onto the shore. I remembered the damp sand between my toes, the grit smoothing down my sole. I could hear the howl of the wind at my back and the cold ripping at my ears.

In the middle of the night, when the fear of all that is unknown awakes me, I check the ferry timetables and calculate how quickly we could pack a bag and leave.

But we cannot leave. We are locked down. We are locked in to survive with those around us, to love those around us. We are locked into our communities so that we cannot help but remember our neighbours and share, at a safe distance, the bread we have made.

We are committed to staying; my heart is desperate to leave.

I had never insisted on much. I had never spoken back, never cajoled nor sidestepped his demands or his tantrums. I had never held his petulant glances, his scornful stare or his leer. I had looked away, looked down. We were two – man and wife – but we were many in our house by the fields. His parents, the brothers, our boys; the women who shared our oven, the men who shared the labour of the fields. There was grain to be ground, bread to be made, gods to be appeased. Every day was a struggle, survival never certain. Quarrelling was a luxury we didn't have.

But if we were to run away, I insisted, we would go in daylight. We weren't running away, he said. We were following the divine path, finding God. Finding the promised land wasn't running away. He said. Man cannot live by bread alone. He said. And the oil in the village trickled down to a drop; the flour in the pots was mixed with dust. We ate like kings, keeping the finest flour stashed behind the shrine. We gave the gods their doughy due and we kept the town's ovens warm with extra fuel, but we ate what was ours and kept it ours alone. Our house of bread wasn't haunted yet; but all around us, ghosts. Hunger gnaws at the soul first. It strangles the spirit, leaving just enough spark to see terrors in the shadows. We were leaving them hungry – my mother, his father, their household, my people. We were leaving them hungry with a wafer-thin promise we would return. That we would send for them when we reached his newly-promised land. I barely remember what we promised; I was preparing myself to insist. If we weren't running away, we should leave in the daylight.
I learned that you can run away while walking. You can run away while wishing blessing on others and promising you'll return. And if your back burns from the hot hungry stares of the ones you leave behind, know this: you are running away. I shook with shame, bundling only a few things together for the journey, hiding an amulet in my belt to bless the baby that was growing beneath. I bent down to feel the scorched earth of Bethlehem for a last time. The land was hot and hard below my hand: the scrub and the thorns, the rocky paths where the weeds took hold, the terraces cutting in and out of the landscape, making the best of the trickle of rain. Our land, our desertion. My shame.

And before we had even stepped beyond our boundary stones, rumour slithered like a snake across our path. She slides her way into desperate hearts. Well-fed on truth swallowed down with a lie, she stretches and coils her whole body around. Tightening her grip on the most innocent believer, leaving them powerless to resist. She sheds her skin as the story grows older. But never thwarted, she keeps moving, reinventing the truth with the lies and the promise of the knowledge of good and evil. Do you want to be remembered? She asks. Do you want a part to play in this small-town drama? Listen in, I'll whisper your lines. She offered them just a bite of an apple for their ravenous bellies. Enough to fill their hearts with malice and distract their minds from hunger. Just enough to make our leaving inevitable and returning impossible. We were running away.

And although they cried when we left, I thought they would never welcome us home.

I was 34 when Mum died. That's not a story. I was old enough to peer into the shadows of life, but at 63, she was too young for death.

Mum was ill for six years. Six years of a cancerous creeping around the edges of living. Time stretched and contracted sometimes pulling us to the limits of ourselves before snapping back in with a treatment, a side effect, a prognosis. We waited until we realised that the waiting would end without her. I set to preparing for the journey into the valley of the shadow of death. I read about grief, and faith and grief, and children and grief. I researched rituals and memorials. and quizzed friends about what life would look like with a parent-shaped hole. I spent nights asking Google about "cancer medication", "chemo side-effects" and "funeral planning". But I couldn't find the answer to the questions I was really asking. When will mum die and will it be terrible? What will become of us? What will become of me?"

I didn't realise that grief would start before death. I didn't realise that snapshots of our life together would project themselves into the afterlife. Birthday cakes, parties and holidays. Standing at the laced end of my sister's wedding train and feeling an overwhelming, lip-trembling relief that we'd all made it. Praying in desperation and doubt that she wouldn't die on my son's birthday, or my nephew's, or my sister's. Preparing for a Christmas that would make a mockery of tradition. Waiting not for Santa but for something unbelievable. Watching the GP trudge for miles through the snow because the roads were impassable. Standing at the top of the stairs as she cried in the night and realising that we had been so exhausted we hadn't heard. Whispering goodbyes at midnight. Marching small boys up and down sand dunes on a bright winter morning, because we needed them to nap because we had a funeral to plan. Life reversed reappears. Click. Click. Click.

I didn't realise that you never just lose one parent. The one who is left is also lost. Somehow, in the hologram of parenting, my dad was not just a father but

the creation of mother and father together. When mum died, he did not become a shadow of his former self. He became his own self. His pain was written across his face, tapped out in the finger impatient against the armchair. He would sit with his back to the door in her pink chair, his head leaned against the headrest and his shoulders shaking, sobbing. This new, unfiltered version of my father was so changed as to become almost unrecognisable. And my whole understanding of faith, based on God as an omnipotent Father, fell apart just as my own beloved dad did.

The truth is Elimelech had no intention of coming home. Or maybe I mean he had no intention of staying at home. We were starting to feel the hunger, that's true. Scrabbling for food, bartering and trading until the trading became a sleight of hand. But before then, long before then, before the wheat failed and the animals shrank – all but their eyes which grew wider with fear – before then, he was pacing the ground, rending his clothes, judging the days which lay ahead and behind. And so a plan formed. A plan or a conviction, a mission, a sleepless redreaming of an old folk tale. To retrace our steps across the Jordan to the land where Moses last read the commandments to his wandering people. To follow in the path of Abraham and Jacob. To be remembered for leaving it all behind for just a glimpse of the face of the unseeable, unnameable divine. And in a slow-building frenzy we started to leave. Not together at first: I followed far behind in heart until we reached the point of no return at the border between myself and my marriage. I disentangled my hopes from those of my sisters, my mother. Our children would not become men together. They would not call out for one other, would not labour or till or harvest the land together. Not for a long time, in any case.

At the Jordan, at the river's edge, we sat down. We had walked all day with the sun in our faces and the ground hot against our feet. I was bleeding. My belly was cramping. The blood soaked through the menstrual rags and trickled down the inside of my leg. I couldn't keep up with the boys. They walked on, all three of them; they didn't look back. I had asked could we in stay Bethlehem for a few more weeks, just to be sure. Just to let the new child get well planted. But he

wouldn't wait. Did Abram wait? Did Moses? The promise waits for no man, he said. Elimelech Bar Judah. His name was all righteousness and respectability.

They reached the river first. When I arrived, Elimelech was wrestling with a lamb which he said he had found in a thicket. Look, he said: The Lord has provided a lamb! Later, long after he was gone, when we were remembering the hidden things, the boys told me that he had bartered it from a trader on the riverbank. He had traded it for a bottle of my mother's perfume. I hunted for that perfume for days after we came to the fields. I assumed a Moabite had stolen it. Elimelech told me that they had stolen it. It was an easy lie to believe. They were all easy lies: easy to tell, easy to hear. Only a fool would believe him.

I stopped tucking my bible into the corner of my suitcase. That was the first step away.

I had owned a shelf-load of bibles over the years: the King James, the Good News, the NIV and the Message, a Spanish New Testament, a French Old and New, a student-friendly gospel of Luke and of John. Some had Jesus' very words – the verilys, fear nots and beatitudes – picked out in pink; others had comic strip illustrations, acres of footnotes and modern commentary.
I underlined and highlighted verses of fortitude and faith in the NIV. I scribbled notes in the margin about fruits of the spirit and the signs of the evil one. Along with the other young people in our Bible Class, I developed an intricate chain reference system which linked one evangelistic verse to another. Should I ever find myself in a battle of wits with a sinner, this biblical trail of breadcrumbs would lead them to redemption via the Old Testament prophets, Paul's dire warnings, the promise of the Messiah, his eventual showtime and encore. We were tooled up to argue against pluralism – especially Catholic and Muslim pluralists – evolution and rock music. We studied maps of Israel and scale models of the temple in Jerusalem. We pored over the anatomy of great whales to prove to ourselves that a man could indeed live inside a fish for three days and come to no harm. We were never, ever, to play an LP backwards because in that underbelly echo of pop lay the Devil's true voice. And should the Lord come or call, then we would know whether we had really said the sinner's prayer or if we

had been fooling ourselves and our families all along. I was so sure that the rapture was imminent that even a game of hide and seek was fraught with danger: what if we never found each other again?

We were encouraged to read our Bible every day. It was important that our daily quiet time should be in the morning and that we use short study notes which married a couple of verses at random with a vaguely-related evangelical interpretation, all accompanied by a picture of a boat in the sunset, or a hilltop in the sunset or a cat in the sunset. I did it for years, religiously – though never in the morning. Above all things, we were to believe - and did believe - that the Bible was God-breathed and literally true. Every jot and tittle. We sang away our curiosity about the difficult bits. We distracted ourselves with long theological words and imminent judgement. We hid the stories of women abused and kept silenced and whole towns murdered for the sake of a vengeful God. We stored those away in a holy cupboard, greased the lock with propriety. But I did learn about the way, the truth and the life as well as resilience, selflessness and love. Those were not clichés. I had oil in my lamp, I was on the train to glory, I was loved by the true and living God. Those were clichés, but well-worn for good reason. And so long as nothing challenged my Northern Irish Baptist faith, or whispered doubt in my ear, all would be well.

In my mid-teens, at just about the point in my life when we were allowed to wear denim jeans to the evening service, the church appointed a man who was certain that his pastoral role was to stamp his unquestionable authority on the hearts and minds of his congregation. He was a big man, a former rugby player, fierce - like a Russian bear. His word was not, ever, to be doubted. His wife was the church organist and her heart, if not her ability, was in a Mississippi honky-tonk bar. She bounced up and down at the organ reinterpreting Wesleyan hymns in her own inimitable fashion. It was awful. The one saving grace in this vaudeville horror was the pianist. Talented, light-fingered, and as it happened – and to her later regret - my sister. And so, one night after another raging sermon about hellfire and damnation, just before the final hymn, and in a church packed to the rafters, I could bear it no more and unplugged the organ. The pastor hissed when his normally subservient wife couldn’t breathe life into the

old beechwood pedals. He commanded my sister to play and although she didn't know his obscure dirge, she, sensing that I may have had something to do with the general loss of control, stumbled through.

It was an entirely un-premeditated moment of rebellion. And for a long time afterwards, I reverted to type, being the compliant, safe Christian woman God had called me to be. I used to read my Bible and pray that I would live a life more like that of the great men of the Bible. That I would dare to be a Daniel. That I would follow God's call to a strange land like Abraham, that I would be a fisher of men, that I would return home like the prodigal.
Instead I would discover that finding faith is not a one-off decision but a life-time of losses and rebellions, of turnings and returnings. And there were many of those. Many moments when I would have to choose between what was good and what was acceptable, between what was just and what was convenient. There were many moments when I had to be honest about what it meant to treat everyone as they were made in the image of God. Even though I wasn't sure what that image was.

I buried him where he fell; cracked the shovel off his skull to be sure that he was dead. And I sat in the house for the seven days, as they decreed. Although they weren't there to know, and so perhaps I wailed and sat as I should. And perhaps I didn't. Out here in the fields of strangers and not a sinner to bring us a bowl of food, perhaps I sat. Or maybe I made a huge feast of the goat we had brought from Israel and the crops grown tall with Moabite rain. Perhaps I lay with the boys in the sweet-smelling grass, our faces turned to the warm sky above. And maybe we chased after the fireflies and the bats in the dark. Only one of us was dead, praise God King of Heaven. And it wasn't me.
We were three – the boys and I – gathering grain from the edges of the fields. But as the crops came in and the ovens warmed and the wells filled up, we became many, many more. They brought us in close, these women of Moab. They brought us in close, though we were strangers in the land. There was grain to be ground and bread to be made, water to be carried back from the wells. There were baskets to weave and wool to be spun. There were still gods – different gods - to be appeased. And when the moon remembered itself, when

the harvest lay full in the barns we danced and we sang and we ate and we drank sweet, sweet wine until we forgot that we had not always been neighbours and friends and family.

But Sabbath was a lonely rest; Passover a muddled, half-remembered affair of used-to ritual and tradition. When the night fell before each Sabbath, I prayed that Boaz might come. I had wrapped my husband's sandals in a linen cloth, tucked them in the saddle bag of a passing trader and directed him to the house of his mother. And for weeks I stood on the little stone wall beyond the house, straining to see a glimpse of him striding across the fields. I was sure he would come. He had come to my aid many, many times before. We couldn't have made it back home on our own, the boys and I. They were too small, the journey too far: we were brave, but not foolish. It was easier to stay a while, grow a little, wait for Boaz to rescue us. But he never came. And in time I made peace with the waiting. The wheat grew tall in the fields, the fig tree stretched a canopy over our heads.

They took him back across the Irish Sea to lie with his mother and father. From chaos to the clay soil one day in late September. A returning to the land. Stuart, my father's brother.

He had left Belfast not much more than a boy, a whole lot less than a man. The same Belfast streets that raised boys with footballs at their golden feet in the 1960s, raised others whose feet longed to roam. He joined the merchant navy and as a sailor, he went to see, see, see. It suited him: the uniformed adventure, the safety and structure, the girl in every port. And his story is told and retold, sometimes kindly, often not; but always with regret. How he chartered the seven seas from Canada to Cape Town. How he tried to come home many times, but when he got there he couldn't find what he'd been looking for, or couldn't remember. How he came, married, settled down, unsettled, unmarried and left.

His family didn't know what to do with this wandering man. He used to say that once on a visit home he shared a Guinness with his godly father. It was a story as

unlikely as finding a copy of the Apocrypha in the old man's bookcase. The push of adventure and the pull of home tangled itself in a knot of nostalgia for a time which had perhaps never existed, and certainly wouldn't again. His family's need to bring him home was as great as his need to elude capture, even in spite of himself. Every part of him was longing. He couldn't bear to go home; and he was too lonely to stay away.

He beached up in Troon, turned over in the surf of solitude and alcohol. And that is where I met him, ten years after finding the Apocrypha among my Granda's books. I didn't go to save him, not in any sense. We went – my husband, the toddler and I - because he was just 20 miles down the road and my dad, tired of a lifetime of losing track of this prodigal needed to stay at home with mum who was slowly fading away.

Stuart was a rake of a man grown languid, shabby and worn. He was a charming drunk, but not a harmless one. I sat with him often: in his dank one-bedroom flat, in the greasy café nearby, in the cancer unit, in the courthouse, in the hospital near the end. Although he cared little for himself, he could cajole the soil to harvest: he grew armfuls of leeks and garlic and beetroot and chillies, potatoes and lettuce and peas. He knew the nutritional value of cat food for a curious toddler but he couldn't feed himself more than tinned soup and tinned cider. The cancer got his throat in revenge for the ciggies which were sweeter air to his lungs than the oxygen the hospital provided.

Stuart was dying at the same speed as I was growing fat with new life. There was none of the deathbed repentance that the old preachers foresaw, but we held his hand and could do nothing more. And on the same day as he was lowered into Irish soil surrounded by his family – my family - I gave birth to a black-haired, black-eyed boy without them. He is unlike my other boys this one. He is knowing and pretending-not-to-know, he is quiet and uproarious, he is oblivious and thoughtful. Before he could speak, he had the look of a child who had been here before. But that, of course, could never be the case. It was just that he had tasted life and death in the same first breath.

I am not used to girls. I am not used to their sideways glances, their whispered secrets and their duplicitous beguiling. I was the girl among the brothers, the daughter-in-law in a house full of men. But the grinding stone lay heavier in my wrinkling hand and my boys were pleased with their attention. It suited us all to bring them into the house and together we built a home. Orpah loved our commandments. She loved doing the right thing and then, when it was done, that she had done it right. She had been the wrong choice. Her family, desperate, had pushed her forward. They were counting the handfuls of flour and with Orpah gone, they had one handful more and one mouth less.
But she had had much to learn: our rituals, our ways, our habits and greetings and sayings, our meanings. Oh, what we mean is hidden deep. As familiar as the land on the other side of the Jordan, as far as the east from the west.
Her husband, my youngest son, was an unreliable builder. But what he lacked in practicality, he made up in kindness. Their bed would fall down at one side; he would slip an extra brick underneath to even it up. When the goats would escape from the pen through the gap in the fencing, he would lure them back in with great handfuls of barley oats and tie them to the gate. But he never fixed the fence and Orpah didn't like to remind him. Perhaps she thought it wouldn't have been right. And although they slept in each other's arms night after night in that big sloping bed, she didn't like to disturb the rest of us with their intimate noises. And so they lay perfectly still, her belly never growing with their mutual satisfaction.

Orpah could not escape herself when they died. She crawled into the shadows of the house, ran to the farthest edge of the plain as if the anger couldn't follow her there. I wondered had she imagined other emotions. Had she hoped to be handsomely overwhelmed by them only in the privacy of her imagination. But the rage was red raw and visceral, corporeal; clawing at her throat and into her empty belly, raging at the back of her eyes, scratching across her palms and across her breasts. She roared until her voice was sore and her tears dried up. She smoothed down her robes and returned to the kneading. She paced. She would lie alongside us letting her hot tears drip over us. She would leap away, not able to bear the gathering clouds of grief, wanting to return to our life before. But the sun cannot stop in her rising or the moon in her setting. The rain will fall and the crops will grow or it will hold back its damp blessing and they

will fail. And she seemed to fade away. Though she stamped the anger down, it burned her through until all that was left was a wisp and a whisper. She burned and was consumed.

But you, Ruth. You brought home yarns of linen which had been dragged over nails again and again and spun soft as baby's hair. You warped each thread gently over the loom and weighed each down with a small stone. I have never known you to be without a free word, but you closed your mouth, weaving the stories of my boys quietly between the threads. In and out went the needle in your hand. Over and under, smoothing out the knots and the twists. And when the bodies of our men were enshrouded and entombed, you folded your arms and pulled your legs in to yourself. Only your eyes moved, darting between the broken roof tiles, the charred ovens and the scorched earth. You thought I had turned my face to the wall. I saw it all.

For seven days more you sat, neither defeated nor defiant. You were silent while Orpah sobbed, while I uttered the praises of holy obligation. And when the seven days were over, you rose and you were somehow changed. May God comfort you, you said. Among all the mourners of Moab and the leaves of the trees and the birds of the air, may God be your comfort. And I was fearful in the loneliness you left behind. I was afraid that I might die without you.

The palliative care nurse moved the hospital into her bedroom. They rigged up drivers and drips, replaced the incidental furniture with a high back chair. They pushed my parent's bed against the wall and set the hospital bed beside it. In one corner of the room sat a cardboard shrine of boxes and bags, all full of bibles, bible reading notes and hundreds of Get Well cards. I wonder how many more would it have taken to help her get well. How many blessings, cards and prayers does it take to tip the holy scales of healing?

The medics crept in on a rota. In the gloaming, her family – those who had known mum for a lifetime longer than us – huddled around the bed. We are not a family of public pray-ers and blessers. We are hand-holders and brow-wipers. We are singers and party-makers and weepers behind closed doors. I had the

looming sense that we were about to sit an exam I hadn't revised for. Or worse, that after revising for over 30 years, I was only now realising that I had been studying the wrong thing. The gift of eternal life loses its cachet when you realise that you are losing your here and now, your very self. A mother in heaven, it must be said, is not as useful as one who can babysit the children and bug the hell out of you on earth. I whispered in her ear that she had done enough. She had shown us the way we should go, and that we and our children and whoever else would come along, would be fine. I told her that we loved her and that she was to go on ahead. She died minutes later, sucking in a few last ragged breaths.

Within hours, the house was full of women laying out cups on trays, disinfecting those they considered too grubby, arranging traybakes and fruit loaf on to doily-covered plates. And for three days, they ushered mourners through our house on a conveyor belt of hospitality, plying each one with tea and cake, moving on those who had stayed too long. These women had had years of practice for this sort of manoeuvre. A pen and open notebook by the phone were a sure sign there had been an emergency. We would hover like flies within earshot, straining for snatches of 'Ethel's neighbour's daughter's friend's husband' and 'tragic situation' and 'bring it to the Lord in prayer'. The phone would click down, a new number dialled, and the story repeated in garbled whispers to the next name on the list. Somebody we didn't know, who we would never meet was in trouble and my mum and her chain gang were all over it. Stuck at home raising children, stage-hands for the men for whom they had given up their own careers, they were a prayer and hospitality crack team: the A-team meets Delia Smith and Amy Carmichael.

We were sleepless, the boys and I, in the months after my mother died. It was nothing dramatic: just plain old grief, just plain old babyness. But the hurting heart and the hurting teeth were no less sore for their ordinariness and we soothed each other with strong tea and Calpol. And I whispered against their hot cheeks. 'You're alright. I am here, I am here.' Over and over again I whispered it until, in the darkness, it became unclear who was whispering and who was listening. And how do you explain heaven if you're not sure where it's found, or if it's to be found at all? How do you talk to your children about faith when the

words seem more contrived than the fairy tales and children's stories you read together every night?

You whisper. I am here. I am here. I am here.

Maybe I squeezed your arm too tight when I was telling you to leave. Maybe you heard a yes in my no, a stay in my go; or maybe you knew you were to blame. The oven too hot, the baskets too close, a spark on the wheat gathered in. I never asked. You never said. From dust we come, to dust we will return. After ten years under the same roof we know each other's ways: careless and carefree; beleaguered and intent. You parch the grain, I grind it down. You knead the flour, I bless it and leaven it. You gather the kindling for the oven fires; I sacrifice the terumah to the gods. You sleep with my sons, I raise the babies. There were no babies. To the dust they all returned. There is nothing left to say.

Each step towards home is a step away from their graves. And when the wind whips up the dust on the path in front, I see them running ahead of me, heads thrown back, arms stretched wide. It takes my breath away. No one can know a boy like his mother knows. No one else will hold his tiny mouth to her breast or lay hands upon his crown. No one else will hold his little hand in the dark. No one else will rage fire in one ear, whisper comfort in the other. No one else knows the names we gave them, my women and I. Their father in jealousy, called them Weak and Sickly. But their names are all that remain to me and I have tucked them away in the deepest crevice of my heart, out of reach of the storytellers, the rumour mongers, the holy men who turn every story into a moral lesson.

Time is not a healer. It cannot soothe; it is not a balm for the heart. It has no compassion for anything except its own passing. It follows its own ruthless rhythm: night unveils the day, season fades into season. That sun will rise and set whether we are here to see it or not. It may warm cold hearts by day but it will chill to the bone by night. Time cannot fix, it cannot help, it cannot heal. It can only pass.

We had been in Glasgow for seven years before I started to feel unsettled. I had won three sons and lost a mum. We had moved house and settled into a welcoming community and yet I felt ill at ease. And in bursts of clarity between the midnight feeds and the settling into nursery I realised that not only did I want to go home, but that I wanted to be remembered. I wanted to be with people who knew where I came from, who understood the black humour, the strict religion, the studied insouciance and the hyper-vigilance nurtured by a sectarian childhood. I wanted to be with people who knew the start of my story just as I knew theirs: the mistakes and the memories, the high-jinx and the low points. And even though we hadn't written the middle chapters of each other's tales, I thought that wouldn't make any difference, because we would write an ending together which would circle us back to the start.

But you don't go home because you've nowhere else to go. You'll always find somewhere else if that's your destination. And you don't go back for old time's sake. Time will not stand still or wait for your return. I could only go back if there was something new to find. If the dream of treasure at the far side the rainbow was brighter than the gold that wouldn't be there. I decided to go home – to Ireland or to church - if I couldn't hold my found self back. And I knew they would all be waiting: all the different for my leaving, but all in all the same.

Every step that is not a protest is a prayer that all I have left behind will not be left behind. We are heading for home, although whose I cannot tell. And whether I will recognise that we have truly arrived, I do not know. The land of my fathers and mothers is spread out before me. Behind, under the chapped earth of the plains of Moab, lie the bodies of the boys who once lay warm by my side.

They were all I had. And now I have only you, Ruth. You who has committed to following me all my life, to worship a God I can't abide, to live with a people who I abandoned. Where can I go to flee from your presence? I scrabble up the mountains and you are beside me. At the edge of the Jordan, you are by my

side. You were the stranger in my house. The fly in my oil jar. You wheedled your way in and I can't peel you off. I slip out of your shadow only to find you in mine. I might lose you in the desert; I might drown you in the river. But the fire in your eye, which I once saw in my own, makes me think you'll stay the course until we reach home. My home.

They will pit us against each other in the telling and retelling of this unlikely tale. For I left full of life and I will return doubly barren: my empty hands and your empty womb.

I don't know what gods married me to a man I loathed. I don't know why they sent me far from home or why they took my boys, but they have entangled my life with yours. So, come with me if you will. Step back over the river to the life I used to live. Walk with me through the wilderness to meet the woman I used to be. Throw a robe over your reasons and call it kindness, call it love. We know it's survival by any means.

The day we moved into our house by the river, Barry McGuigan beat Eusebio Pedroza after fifteen rounds in the ring. With nothing yet to sit on, we sprawled over the living room floor, eating chips from the chippie and watching Barry's da sing Danny Boy. Northern Ireland didn't have many good moments then, in the 1980s. And we had no idea about boxing, but this was a moment that we wanted to be swept up in. The pipes were calling.

Our house stood at the bottom of a long dark lane. It had been a farmhouse, attached to a yard with three large barns and two labourers' cottages. My dad bought it without any of us visiting it. Everyone thought he was mad; my mum thought he was a hero, and she was neither daft nor fawning.

It was a great box of a house sitting in acres of land, bordered by towering fir trees. A huge sloping lawn fell down into the river below, fenced off only by large-leafed rhubarb and treacherous nettles. Mum was sure that rats wandered up from the river in search of treats from the kitchen. I never saw any. Mowing the lawn was an extreme sport and learning to throw yourself off the ride-on

lawn-mower before it would hurtle into the water or smash into the patio was a basic safety precaution.

We turned the 19th century cottages into playrooms for me and my sisters. A large greenhouse was the source of seasonal mourning for the tomatoes we planted and lost. There was a trick to growing tomatoes, the pastor said, and we didn't have it. The barns were kept for storage, although even now I can't think what treasure we had to store, and the largest barn became a summer dance floor. Mum had neither rhythm nor melody; Dad had less then he thought. But they loved a party, albeit within strict Presbyterian limits. No alcohol and all home by twelve: let your hair down by all means, but don't lose the clips.

It was our home for thirty years and although I left almost completely after fourteen of those years, on a sleepless night, I can recreate every square inch in my mind. I can pad out of my teenage bed, tiptoe on chilblained toes along the pitch-black hallway to the stairs. Holding on to the mahogany banister, I climb the stairs in the dark until I can see the stars and the lights from the houses across the river reflected on the water beneath. I remember racing to the kitchen in the dark, scrabbling for glace cherries from the baking cupboard and, much later, for infant Calpol for the baby threatening to waken the whole house with his boiling gums. And I remember other nights: nights which were not for dancing or babies or moment-making; nights which tell the story of a home where the doors were starting to close and would not re-open.

After Mum died the house was both too full and too empty for Dad. And in the years between losing and leaving, the house - which until then had seemed to defy age and erosion – grew weary. Like the rest of us, it seemed not to know how to navigate the new world order. The flowerbeds became recklessly overgrown. The whitewash peeled off the barn walls and the paint blistered on the doors. The lane from the road, although we widened and lit it, had never felt darker. The cats which we had bought to see off the rats sashayed away. Dad struck a deal with a builder who would replant the land with a dozen houses for other families, other stories. And some day other lives will be lived out on our childhood playground. But for now, where my home once stood, is a towering pile of rubble shrouded in weeds. Through the bricks and the stour you

might glimpse a barn door and stretching towards the sky is the chipped remains of a mahogany bannister.

My legs ache. My knees stiffen with each descent. The water and the wilderness betray no sign that we have passed through, but my body carries the weight of every step.

Above, in a sweep of sky, a silent eagle displays the glory of her wings. The black and white feathers of youth make a patchwork arrow across the stretch of her body in flight. The wing tips, like long slender fingers, reach out towards what seems beyond her grasp. Her path of flight is written in her wings. But as the years go by, the map writ large on her body will bury itself into the brown plumage of age. She plunges towards the wild grass and sinks her talons into a young goat who has been separated from its roaming herd. She pecks at the pelt of her prey. She juts her hooked beak again and again into the body of the lamb, shredding the matted fur, tearing out the raw flesh. She hops from one taloned foot to another as the hot air rises from the sand. Neither startled nor alarmed at our arrival, she looks up from the carcass as we pass by.

We wrap blankets tightly around when the sun gives way to the night sky. We lean against each other in our unsleeping like a small dark mound nestled in the hillside, like a stone set against a tomb. My brow is tight from the strain of looking for the green fields of Bethlehem. Saltwater trickles across my forehead where the oil of welcome will surely soon anoint. And my tongue, thick with thirst, craves another taste of the water overflowing Jordan's banks. Goodness and mercy lie just beyond the horizon. And in two days, maybe three we will dwell there, in the House of Bread, forever.

I barely remember the way back home although my feet bear the callouses from every step. This is the expected happy ending: the hero has returned, the quest is completed, the gods are placated. In another story, my father would meet me at the city gates with wine and a fattened, doomed calf.

We returned to duty, to the grindstone and the oven. We returned to a house

gone to seed and tombs fallen into disrepair. The women didn't argue over my bitterness or insist on my unfailing kindness. They know I am neither all goodness nor all malice. When they saw me, they held their tongue and I saw myself reflected in their gaze. When I raged at the heavens, they bowed their heads. When the heavens replied in silence, they whispered amen.

This should be the end: that the wanderer has returned. But I am not the heroine here; not in my own town, not even in my own story. They thought I was dead. Pour ashes on my head, rend my clothes, leave me in buried in my shame. I have returned with nothing but a foreigner and the spirits of the men I have left behind. And while I beg the heavens for witnesses to my crime of being alive, they may wish I was dead still for now I am another mouth to feed. There will be no party. The barley fields are ready for harvest and there is work to do.

It was Auntie Anne who taught my sister and I to bake. Not that mum couldn't bake; but I think her specialism in child-rearing were more finishing school than primary. Once the foundations were covered, she could concentrate our minds on the flourishes.

Auntie Anne is your classic baker – all pink cheeks and belly laugh. If she can't find joy at the bottom of a pudding bowl, it is probably not worth finding. She was no slave to a recipe but seemed to make things up as she went along. I suspect, with hindsight, that's how she lives most of her life. I don't remember much about her kitchen, but I remember lumps of butter so soft you could poke a squidgy finger into it, cloudfuls of flour, mountains of gleaming white sugar. I remember golden shortbread gone grey with grubby hands and the cats leaving floury footprints across the worktop. I remember multi-coloured Christmas lights and decorations my mother would never have allowed and reading The Broons while we waited for the oven to finish. We licked the bowl, we licked the spoon, we wiped our greedy fingers along the whisk. We served our burnt offerings proudly around the room and my mother, both delighted and appalled, would nibble on one of our germ-flavoured biscuits between cleansing sips of tea.
At home, the biscuit tins were always full of home-made goodness: fifteens, currant squares, poor man's Florentines, Mars Bar buns, shortbread, crispy

cakes, rocky road, carrot cake. Some made by my mum, some by Auntie Anne and other women who loved each other through shared tray-bakes. I knew the biscuits tins in the cupboard better than I knew my own socks. I knew which were ours and which had come from Lynda or Heather or Mattie, even before reading the name written on a scrap of paper, stuck down with yellowing Sellotape. The recipes, freely shared, were kept in a squared plastic tub in hard-backed little binders or old school jotters. There were no fancy labels or files; all the goodness was in the giving, in the sharing, in the eating.

And there was always fruit loaf. Thickly sliced with a smear of butter, produced for any and every occasion. A morning prayer meeting, an evening service, an illness, a funeral, an induction service, a new baby: no rite of passage was complete without a piece of fruit loaf and a cup of tea. Mum brought me one when our first son was born. She sent one over the water when our second son arrived. And there was only one recipe worth following, in our house at least. I can't believe it wouldn't have reached to the very corners of the Irish protestant world. Auntie Anne's fruit loaf recipe was gospel. In dark corners of happy meetings, we would mutter about the attempts of other bakers, debating whether it was the sugar that wasn't dark enough or a stinginess with the butter that was bringing the occasion into disrepute. A few years later, pregnant again, I found the recipe for myself and discovered it relied more heavily on magic than method. Boil the fruit – of indeterminate sort – in a saucepan, with about a cup of water and with as much sweetness as you need for as long as it might take. Melt in butter from a real cow. Perhaps from the one which you passed this morning: a great strong checker-board beast with eyelashes longer than you could only dream of and aching teats fuller of nature's milk than your own. Add in a few eggs from the hens, flour from the fields, a sprinkle of baking powder and slowly fold it all in together. The mixture will yield you one huge loaf; or two slightly smaller. It could probably stretch to three if you don't mind them a little flatter. You could bake it and half it and wrap it in a clingfilm to make it go further again.

I made it that first time and in every bite I tasted the kindness of the women who had, in their own way, brought me up. In the night as I nursed the baby, in the afternoon when I needed a boost before the other boys would come home, I

would boil the kettle and disappear into a buttery, fruity, sugary embrace. Over the years I have made it over and over again. For the women whose mums are not around to be grannies, for my Albanian friend who is more carer than wife, for the women who have come to Glasgow for love but who are lonely for home, for the shut-in and shut-up: for all the women who brought me back to life.

There is a catch in my throat, a dry scratch and a gasping, a wheezing for breath. There's the shame of the tears, like the shame of the rain on the harvest that's barely brought in. There's the shake of the voice after days sent mute, the pull at the throat as if loosening a noose, there's the whisper, the rasp, the grasp after hope. I am spent. Here, in the deathly quiet of the house we abandoned, are the shades of our boys, his parents and mine. Etched in the walls are years of survive or die, of your grief and mine. Somewhere along the way I've forgotten who is dying and who is watching die. It makes no difference: together we live, together we fade away.

The bread baskets lie empty, the grain jars are kicked through. The shrines and the amulets keep watch where we left them: immoveable, immutable. An unchanging God brings no comfort to me now, when all the world around is changed. I lie prone on the cobbles where the animals once stood. His holy foot pins my heart to the floor. His silence fills the whole house. I am deafened. I am defeated.

In the days when the judges ruled, we weaved our women's stories in and out of every thread. The needle pulled Tamar and Rachel and Leah, Lot's daughters and Hagar and Sarah through every cloth. Entrapment, betrayal, seduction, deceit. Survival sounds different in the mouths of women. We were not silent when the men and the gods dealt unfair hands. Didn't you hear us? Were you not listening? When the grain was for grinding, we sang of the ghouleh and the gods, of crossing the Jordan to the lush fields of dates and pomegranates. Did they keep watch for us? Did they stand on the flat roof as the moon filled and unfilled, waiting for us to come home? Did they strain their eyes against the sun, did they stretch up from binding the sheaves and imagine they saw us return? It was only I who returned. Through the dust and the shards of light, I hear them

calling my name. They sing out for the Naomi they once knew. But she has gone, knocked down by the waves of the Jordan, lost in the pillar of cloud in the wilderness. Bitterness fills my whole being; Naomi was buried by the wayside. I thought we would dwell here until the end. But you were right, my Moabite daughter, this is only another lodging house along the way. And still the women sing. They bring bread to my door. Their children's children play out in the fields. You are beguiled by their delight and I hear the door gently close behind you.

The sun moves across the sky dragging a shadow across the floor and from my stool I see the eagle nestling her newly-hatched young under her wings. They are wet with birth, exhausted, nearly blind. Day after day she sits, sheltering. Their father flies back and forth, bringing food. And still she sits.

Hundreds of women and babies trooped into the church hall four mornings a week over my five baby-raising years. The children were the cover that allowed us admit to one another the grinding loneliness of our days. The plastic toys strewn across the hall, the stench of maturing nappies, the instant coffee and bourbon biscuits: all standards we were happy to drop in exchange for a short release from our hostage situation. Unlike other toddler groups nearby, we didn't have a quota. If you made it to the doors, you were welcomed in.
Gail arrived the minute the doors opened. Pale-face and wide-eyed, her words tumbled out as though she hadn't spoken to another human for weeks. It turned out she hadn't really. The boy had come to her six weeks before as a toddler. Too pale, too thin, like a tiny plant kept out of the light and away from water for a little too long. The words poured out of her. We can't stay, but we came just to see that you're really here. She had adopted him six weeks before and this was their first venture beyond their own front door. We were really there. We were teachers and physios and script-writers and lawyers and hotshots and deadbeats masquerading as mothers. We were incoherent with tiredness. We shared advice on teething and tantrums. We served each other tea, we cuddled each other's unbearable children. And for one intense moment, for a moment which would never end and which would be gone before we had really known what it was, we clung to each other.

Morag always arrived when the hall was fuller, when arriving was less noticeable, dragging her boy along. He was never quick enough or good enough and she asked every time was it OK that they came. He was a bona fide toddler; expecting the unexpected was her only defence against embarrassment. And yet she must have known that already because he was flesh of her flesh, son of her son. She had seen his like before. For reasons I'm not sure I knew, Morag was the boy's grown-up most of the time. She worked two jobs, cleaning offices before dawn and starting again in the late afternoon. Her husband drank, she told me, so she kept her money where she could see it and where he couldn't. And she kept the boy close while pushing him away.

We were each other's best audience for minute by minute weather reports on the micro-climate of a small baby's life. We plotted grand escapes to day spas and city breaks but fretted about popping to the loo. We burned with shame at their tantrums but threatened death to anyone rude enough to gloat. We were utterly self-absorbed in this new world and somehow knew that life could only lie in allowing others peak into the most secret corners of ourselves. Is it too pious to say I felt God in that place? Perhaps. But in those years, I didn't see God anywhere else.

Tob loved that woman. That's all there was to it, really. Over the years, as they had come to know each other's ways, he realised he couldn't live without her. Not that he couldn't *love* without her: that sort of thinking was for other men with bolder hearts. He couldn't live without her. If he had ever known how to scrub his own clothes against the river stones or bake a loaf of bread over the open fire, he didn't know these things now. He didn't need to know. He had a wife, two daughters, two sons: a cook, two servants, two heirs. And he loved his land. He had tilled it and ploughed it, rested it and walked it season after season. It had been their father's land of course, now parcelled up for each of the three boys.

Elimelech had had great plans for his plot. He had built huge pens for the herds of sheep promised by a passing border trader. With the arrogance of Joseph, he

declared that the whole town would prosper from the livestock. There would be milk to churn to cheese, wool to spin and new flocks to breed. But the promise of sturdy ewes was a ragged edged one. The ewes, when they arrived, were scrawny, their wool jumping with lice. And when the rains stopped and the fields dried up as hard as rock, they – and the promise they held - shrivelled away. When the sweet taste of hope was replaced by bitter disappointment, when we disappeared into the night, Tob kept his eyes fixed on the bruised red soil, willing it to recover. The ancient trees bearing olives, pomegranates and figs must have heard his persistent prayers in the end.

His younger brother had never seemed to need to persuade Shaddai of his loyalty. This runt of the litter, his mother's delight with honest eyes and warm heart attracted goodwill and devotion like bees to pomegranate juice. Even the gods were flattered. While Tob and his boys worked diligently, quietly in the field beside, the fields of Boaz would ring with the laughter and song of hordes of labourers weaving their way through the proud grain to long tables laid with the fruits of the harvest.

Tob could barely imagine such a life. I don't think it ever occurred to him to long for it. He wanted nothing more than his daily bread, a kind wife and someone to pass his land on to when his days were over. Who could complain about that?

In another church across town, mould blossomed on the walls like an escaped blob of ink from a silver fountain pen. For those same five years, Sunday after Sunday, with baby after baby after baby I sat on the floor of the dark back room reserved for creche and pushed plastic cars over a ramp. I was a dab hand at changing dirty nappies and mopping up puke on the increasingly damp carpet. Sometimes someone sat with me. Sometimes someone sat for me. Most often I and whichever baby was most needy were banished alone. And there, in the grimness of that small holding pen, I would sit the baby on my knee and sniff in his holy createdness and think I was both the luckiest and most forgotten woman on earth.

We would be summoned back to the hall for coffee. I turned a blind eye while the boys made a beeline for biscuits as a lunch substitute. And somewhere amidst the small talk about elderly ailments and highlights of the sermon, someone would ask if it wasn't about time I started pulling my weight for the Lord. Church for the mothers of young children is nothing short of seven circles of hell. Most men I know seem to have an uncanny knack of sleeping through screaming babies and sermons. I wonder if the frequency levels are the same. For all the women who had gone before us, for all the people who had brought us up in churches all our lives, we really tried. We would take on what we could and would burn out within weeks. We were unreliable, we were unpredictable, we were exhausted to our core. And therefore, we seemed to hear them say, we were dead weight. One Sunday from a lectern, I told them to shove their volunteering up their holy arse. More or less. But we still didn't leave. Church was less like a community and more like community service, parole bracelets and all. I had already lost my heart, mind and body to the children. In plain sight of the wonder of them, it felt like I was losing my soul. I don't often say that out loud. Friends, lovers, sisters, are mortified when you say such a thing out loud. But with all sense of holy community gone, I had run out of options. The balance of faith and doubt was tipping in the favour of doubt and I no longer cared who knew it. I knew the news might trickle back home, but even then the shame of being a backslider was less than the failure I had felt in myself. I had felt it, and was not broken by it, and therefore the faith in the doubt must have been stronger than the doubt in the faith. I started with relocating my soul. If years of sitting through Sunday services (and the rest) are good for nothing else, they'll help you find your soul. Even if those same years of sitting through Sunday services have piled blankets of guilt, and a cardboard box of denial over your spirit, you still know where it is. It is there, just to the left of your deepest passion, hidden behind your shoutiest bugbear. It is the part of you that wants to soar in rage at injustice or melts with the warmth of human kindness. You'll never forget where you put that bit of you.

Do you ever know the mind of a man like Boaz? You might trace the curve of his shoulders in the smooth, red earth, feel the rough of his cheek in the chaff. You might taste the bitter in the same wine, the sweet in the same fig. And you

might hide from each other among the wheat sheaves, cling to each other in the thunder. You might let the prayers of childhood roll off your tongue in the fading light and hide among the skirts of our mothers though they are long departed. You might pick out the same stars with your fading eyes as you did when the skies were bright and the moon lit up the silver fields. Year after year, you might work the fields together: swing wide the sickle, gather and bind. You might watch as he strides the field from the centre to the edges. You might blow air through the grain. You might lay out a blanket for him over the husks scattered on the threshing floor.

But a lifetime passes. A river rolls between; a wilderness divides.
I will always know the mind of a man like Boaz. For he is every man I ever knew. He is every memory of my childhood unremembered. He is of me as I am of him for our mothers were entwined at our birth. He is as known to me as my own heart, and he is as mysterious. He is the morning star, the eagle's rise. He is the sun's rise in the east and the chill of the evening when it falls. His valour grows with flattery, his kindness blooms with beauty. His feet will settle on land he has not yet planted. He will choose owning over belonging. He will grow strong among the elders. He will sweep away the husk from the threshing floor. He will be adored, he will be revered; and we will be fed.

The children's chatter rose and fell in the half-light between the bunkbeds, the cot and the double. We had treated ourselves to a night in a hotel and the slow descent to sleep had begun. My boys were restless. We turned on the radio to hear two children talking: a boy and a girl or two boys. I don't remember. They might have talked about school or a drawing competition, a football match or each other. I don't know. I'm not sure I ever listen to the detail of children's chatter but my heart swells and tightens when it overhears the giggles, their grasping for words to put a shape on life. A presenter's voice, a woman's voice, filled the corners of the room after the children's words had clattered finally to a full stop. Their mother had died. There had been an accident on the stairs, she said. That was all she said.

I remember that woman and her children every time I go down the stairs, every

time I climb into the attic. Did she trip? Did she lose her balance carrying laundry in one hand, a cup of tea in the other? Did the hem of her trousers catch on the roof space ladder when she was storing away the Christmas tree? Did they hear her fall? Did they find her curled into herself at the bottom of the stairs?

Losing a parent in your mid-thirties is not extraordinary. In the moments after mum died, I wrote to let my people know. 'Ours is not the only story in town today. Whatever your tale, may you – me we – find peace, joy and hope just as we need it.' I was wrong. In that moment and for our family, ours was the only story. The story of a middle-class, 34 year old woman with healthy children and an ordinary life losing her mother slightly earlier than usual is still a story of loss. I used the odd energy I found in bereavement to deflect attention from this holy muddle of a moment. I was liberal with the balm, quick to apply calm. But what I needed to do was to sit in the dark and know that the candles shone for me before I could light one for anyone else.

To my embarrassment, I talked about myself for weeks. I couldn't stop, the words would shape and reshape in my mouth and pour out in different sentences, different phrases which were all trying to find a way to say the unsayable. My women held my children, made meals and cups of tea. They looked faintly appalled when I cried. They made no claim to faith, but I saw the love of God in them. They became my holy people. It took me a long time before I could say "this is my loss, my grief, my story. This was *my* mum." Because when you claim your story, you also lay claim to the terrifying loneliness of uncharted territory.

I stand at the doorway every morning and every evening to watch the shape of you leave and return. And with every returning, with every bushel of barley and wheat, you become less foreign to me. I can see the hands of my women in every sheaf. I can hear them calling out, steering you towards every broken stalk. It may be Boaz who allows it, but it is the women who pass over the crops they might have kept for themselves for we are the orphan and widow and stranger. Who are you, Hesed?

She is kindness: fiercer than love, stronger than death. She asks for more than pity, more than remembering. She knows and she sees and she slips her way silently into the hard places. She works and she sweats and she pulls at the wheel. She reaps a harvest from the edges of the fields. She sifts the wheat from the chaff. She kneads and she bakes and she sacrifices to the gods on the shelves. She serves. She sits by the dying and washes the dead; she holds the hands of those who are fading to grey. My hands. She breathes life into old bones. She washes the soles of my feet.

She is kindness: indescribable, unremarkable. She is quick-witted, sure-footed, swift to flatter and cajole. She is a bold and unexpected stranger. She is the friend of my heart, the flesh of my flesh. A blessing, not a commandment: not innocent or guileless, not submissive or mild. She expects neither praise nor punishment.

She has pulled me from my languor. She has roused me from my stupor.
She is you my daughter, lover of my son. She is you all my sisters, who remember the past and forget what need not be remembered. She is the rhythm in my routine, the comfort in the ritual. She is constant as the moon as she empties and fills, spilling light over the threshing floor.

That moment which I dreamed about when I was 15, 16, 17 – that moment of finally becoming an adult – was not as thrilling as I had imagined it would be. My smallest boy used to call adults 'growing ups' and I love that idea that you never really arrive at full maturity. But there comes a point – perhaps on a Saturday evening when you're filling out car insurance online with one finger, while stirring baked beans with the other hand and stepping round shards of Lego, and your best friend has stood you up again, and your core family unit is almost unrecognisable – there comes a point when you think: "there's no one else who can live this life for me now. I'm captain of this ship. I'm the adult."
And not only was that moment not thrilling, it was terribly lonely. And, where once I might have prayed, I had nothing except the suspicion that perhaps, in this ongoing storm of life, Jesus was asleep. And those men of the Bible whom I had prayed to be like: Abraham, Daniel, the prodigal boy? With all due respect,

they had never been mothers and carers and schoolbag packers and part-time workers and birthday party organisers, stretched to breaking point with the very real mundanity of life.

I was so busy – we were so busy, Paul and I - trying to bale out the water on our everyday, nappy-filled, work-filled, grief-filled lives – that I just kept going. And eventually, worn out with life and tired of waiting for God to show up, I gave up. I left the church that we were attending and for six months each Sunday morning, I walked through Scotstoun and Jordanhill and listened to podcasts for people like me. People who had grown up with a faith which was drowning in life. It was a sort of pilgrimage. It was definitely a wilderness. And it prompted me to think of others who had walked this way before. Not the men in search of a promise, but the woman in search of a better life. But when this woman got there, she discovered that all of life had come with her. Her husband died, but in her grief she kept going because her two boys needed her. And she had barely got them raised and married before they died and she was left alone in a strange land with two foreign daughters-in-law who depended on her for their survival. And as a woman of God, she raised her voice to the sky and shouted, just like Job did, "how could you do this to me?! What have I ever done to deserve this?" In her desperation to survive, she decided to go home – alone. But even then she was thwarted because one of the women – Ruth – wouldn't let her go. And for four days, they trekked back home across the desert, over the raging Jordan, past the graves of the women who they had loved and lost many years before. Until finally, they get to the gates of Bethlehem and her friends rush out to meet her and say, "Naomi? Is that really you? You look like you've had a bad paper-round!" And Naomi says, "I've been so turned upside down with life that I don't even know my own name." And in the community of those women, in the workers of the fields, God shows up. Right there, in among her neighbours and friends: God shows up.

And right there was the woman I had been looking for all these years. A bitter, middle-aged woman who could speak her mind to God and God would listen. God would gather a community around her and bring her home.

Since Mum died, our boys have grown and a new one has come along; our wider family has united, almost imploded and come together again; beloved homes have been sold and new starts attempted. Friends old and new have brought great blessing, others have scuttled away, a few have been inexplicably cruel. For a while you distrust your own judgement. Others distrust your judgement, framing every action and word – rightly or wrongly – against grief. It's exhausting.

We went out for lunch the damp, cold day when I closed the door on our family home for the last time, about a week before my birthday. The café stands at a point of the River Bann where Seamus Heaney, in a few beautiful lines in *The Squarings*, believes he glimpses the afterlife. The unseasonal chill of both the rain and my heart were warmed by the light searing between the river's lateral marks. It seemed a fitting spot in which to breathe in 30 years of memories and to lay down this current heightened sense of loss. For the first time in a long time, hope was awakened by beauty and balanced out despair.

A friend happened to pass and in a moment of rare, ecstatic – and, as it turns out, mistimed – contemplation, I said, "Look! It's heaven!"

He replied, "It's always heaven here. I don't need to stand in the rain to see it." I needed to stand in the rain. Grief feels like living in constant winter: dark, damp, cold. And in that season, there is a constant grappling over tasks which were previously unthinkingly easy but now feel like a battle against the elements. The only choice was to live through it or hide from it. I chose to stand in the rain just in case I would see a glimpse of light on the river. Living faithfully in that intensity of grief was inexplicably exhausting. Life storms around you in glory and chaos, in joy and distress beyond what you could ever imagine in advance. I am still not sure I have the faith to withstand the ordinariness of love and loss. I'm still not sure I have the will to pass on that faith, intact, to my children. But like Naomi, I am learning that the divine appears in the day to day, in the supportive community of women. And I believe that in those moments, when you leave behind all that you have previously, comfortably believed, God walks alongside – often in amiable silence - with every step you take back towards home.

They will tell you that ten men, the elders of the House of Bread, decided upon our fate. They will tell you that ten men bore our salvation. These men are the fathers of my fathers, walking back across the years until the world itself began. These men are sons of my sons. They will bring stories of quests and pilgrimages, of land and promise to the city gates. They will decide who may live, who may love, who may be heard. These are our men: our friends and our lovers, our helpmeets and neighbours, our priests and our kings and our judges. But they are not our storytellers.

For the women will tell a different tale. In the warping and weaving of thread through thread, they will sing a song for a holy day. In the sifting and parching and kneading and baking they will sing of hesed become flesh. They will sing out the names of our children, believing that in every one is the Messiah born. And I will be among them, Naomi and Mara, the one against whom the divine has struck out. I am the one who returned home. Age has weakened my eyes, it has tremored my hands. And it is perhaps for this that I cannot find God on the shelves or in the skies. Elohim hovers over the comings and goings of my life, beyond reach, beyond the edges of belief.

In the days when the judges ruled, when the last of the flour dusted the bottom of the jar and the heat of the oven grew faint, my mother would celebrate the rain. When the heavens grew heavy over the red broken earth like ponderous breasts, she would dance. She would step out into the land beyond the walls of the house and, grasping her robe in one hand, she would tilt her mouth up to the sky. In the rain you have remembered us as you remembered our mother Sarah, she would sing. And it would rain until the rivers ran as red as the ground for days and days and days. The fields would spring to fresh green life. And then, without reason or warning, the heavens would close up and we would be forgotten again.

But you will remember. You will remember when you retell the stories of Rachel and Leah and Tamar and Sarah. You will remember when you bake bread, when you pour water, when you name your babies and when you yell at the heavens.

You will remember the God of the wilderness. You will remember the God of the women and She will bless you in your leaving and in your returning.

Once it's all over we take a photo. We never mean to take it at the end, but the beginning comes upon us so quickly, despite the slow burn of the remembering candle lit in November. And before we know it, we're into a whorl of cards and decorations and parties and food and presents and fairytale creatures and filled stockings and traditions and grumpy relatives and medicinal wine and boats across the sea or back again and New Year; and then we're done. And by the end, the Christmas tree is no less bedraggled than we are. The pine needles are shedding, the baubles are precarious. And by the end, I am desperate for it all to be over so that we can get back to ordinary time. But first, the photo.

We are thrown together. Someone finds the big camera which has spent most of the year rammed in the back of a cupboard. And perhaps the tripod, or more often, a makeshift pile made of table, then boardgame boxes, Christmas books, a selection box, a wedge of cheese, a little wooden manger, and the camera balanced on top. The light is never right. The twinkling fairy lights have lit up the December gloom just beyond the edges of our imagination and no more. We throw on all the pendants and spots. We rig up extra reading lights commandeered from bedrooms.

Boyish boredom, appalled at the prospect of returning normality, turns feral. There are headlocks and punches. Someone finds a chocolate box under the sofa and shoves the contents in their cheeks. Someone finds a tennis racquet and wraps it around a leg. Someone always tries to climb the tree. Parents turn poacher, confiscating all distractions; but we are always outfoxed. The timer is set, reset and ignored. One of us will wrestle the baby straight. And in the end, the photo captures a moment of unbridled, giddy chaos.

The next moment, no less true than the one before but uncaptured for all of time, might be less carefree: caught up in worries for the year to come or the reeling from the one left behind. But the photo is the time stood still as the

years roll on. It is not the last moment or the forever moment; this is not the moment of truth. It is the moment of hope.

Section four: Learning from Naomi

4.1 Naomi in the foreground

Christian soteriological interpretations of Hebrew texts can overlook the inherent Jewishness of stories such as the Book of Ruth. Sung at Shavuot to mark the acceptance of the Torah, Ruth is integral to ancient and modern Jewish identity. In our rush to find the evangelical implications of these stories, we forget that these stories have been told and retold from generation to generation in order to understand the relationship between God and God's people. By displacing the voices of Ruth and Boaz (and their functions of outsider, redeemer and progenitor line of David) this work has given space to consider the relationship between Naomi and the reader.

Contemporary readers are so far removed from the ancient near eastern storytelling culture that the richness hidden between the lines is all but lost. This thesis has sought to rediscover the nuances which make the Book of Ruth a treasure within the biblical canon. I have embraced the opportunity provided by the narrative gaps within the story of Ruth and Naomi. As Athalya Brenner suggests in her work on Ruth and Esther, attentiveness to and understanding of the *textual delicacies in plot and language* has allowed great scope for imaginatively re-writing this story.[184] I have retold segments of this story not just to recite a good story from a new perspective but also to remind the reader that although ancient Israelite women may not share our culture, they do share our humanity.[185]

Further, in losing the cultural context and multi-layered understanding of Hebrew texts, we confine the stories to one linear meaning and remove any possibility of other outcomes or other learnings. After extensive research and exegesis, I have foregrounded Naomi's story, allowing her to explain her complex relationship with the divine. This work has also examined a grief-motivated challenge to God's divine beneficence. In contrast to God's poetic retort to Job, I have explored how Naomi finds divine consolation in her

community, in her women and in daily routines and rituals. In this way, I have invited the reader to 'perceive, in this apparently personal, mundane story of food and family connections, large realms of spiritual significance."[186]

4.2 More than a metaphor

One of the aims of this thesis was to write Naomi as more than simply a metaphor or figuration. Within the discipline of nomadic theory, Rosi Braidotti defines a figuration as a "politically informed image of thought that evokes or expresses an alternative vision of subjectivity".[187] This thesis has attempted to bring to life a Naomi perhaps unfamiliar to the contemporary reader. I have contextualised her story within the Hebrew canon and delved into the daily lives of ordinary ancient Israelite woman through biblical archeology and ritual studies. In response I have revisioned Naomi within a richer, more accessible landscape and, through life-writing, have identified my story with hers. Braidotti emphasises the importance of ensuring that the figurations do not become "metaphors …[or] generic images of 'humanity".[188] The tale of an elderly, disenfranchised woman in northern Africa during the iron age will never be the story of a middle-aged, middle class, contemporary, white woman in the West. A more thorough understanding of a womanist hermeneutic would have allowed me to round out the character of Naomi more comprehensively. Wilda Gafney's definition of womanism appears to allow some grace: 'Womanism emerges from the lived experience of Black women historically, and cannot be performed by anyone who is not Black and femme.'[189] Yet, she also invites those of us with white privilege to listen 'for the perspectives of the most powerless voices in solidarity with Womanists'.[190] My half-listening is not a limitation restricted to this thesis: it is the work of a lifetime to listen with both ears.

Further, this thesis focuses exclusively on a woman of a certain age at a particular stage in life. Nicola Slee observes that a simplistic definition of 'women' is unsatisfactory when applying a feminist hermeneutic to a story such as that of Naomi.[191] However, she is pragmatic in not allowing the complexity of womanhood dampen efforts to research the faith development of women and girls. This thesis centres on the faith development of one woman (me) and two

stories (mine and Naomi's). Further exploration into the contemporary participation of ordinary women and girls within the life of the people of God would have enriched this work further.[192]

I have not only omitted to explore theories around contemporary faith development. I have also explored the stories of biblical matriarchs less thoroughly than I would have liked. Lucretia Mott, speaking of the importance of a rich and curious feminist hermeneutic, cautions against pinning our faith on other people's sleeves.[193] Much like the midrashists, she advocates for a faith which places each personal experience of faith within the divine meta-narrative: 'comparing text with text'.[194] I could have spent much more time exploring the stories of the women who inspired the Book of Ruth. While I have nodded curtly to their influence, there is much left to infer from the stories of Job's wife, Lot's daughters, Sarah, Hagar, Rachel and Tamar. Does Ruth's seduction of Boaz redeem the story of her foremothers? Does the love between Naomi and Ruth repair the Sarah-Hagar split? While there are similarities between Naomi's trauma and that of Job's, we hear very little from Job's wife. Her children, like Naomi's sons, remain dead even when life resumes a more even keel. We hear Rachel's cries for the slain and exiled children throughout. A greater understanding of the stories of the women who have gone before would be a great foundation for this thesis and for an evolving faith.

4.3 Inspired by Naomi

The creative intertwining of my story with Naomi's was inspired by commentators who suggest that the Book of Ruth originates in the constructive work of an old, wise woman. [195] If Naomi's main function in the Book of Ruth is not dissimilar to that of many middle-aged women: to enable those around her to fulfil their potential. Therefore, I have created a woman's story, where men and young women are not absent from but accessories to the plot. In contrast to traditional biblical texts, it is women, across generations and cultures, who push the story on from its reflective opening to final blessing.

This has not been an easy story to tell. As Kierkegaard observes, life is lived forward but understood backwards.[196] It has been an intricate and slow process to weave the revisioning and life writing together. I did not want to present either a saccharine, fairy tale or a deeply cynical narrative. I found Rachel Held Evan's guidance for reimagining biblical characters helpful. Using pathos and humour, I hope that I have followed her advice to '[not] dazzle or instruct or lecture, but to tell the truth – in all its beauty, frustration and surprise'.[197] In telling the story of a woman who is often ignored, I hope I have shown how ordinary lives have a place within the canon of faith and how stories can shape faith.

I lost my voice for about 18 months when I was 19. As a result, although I have written pieces to be read aloud for twenty years, I am nervous of my speaking voice and very rarely choose to perform them myself. Exploring the character of Naomi has emboldened me to write pieces in my own name and to speak publicly more regularly. In the early stages of my research, I wrote a sermon for Christian Aid Week which interwove the story of Ruth and Naomi with the Highland Clearances and the forced exile of 65 million people due to climate change and conflict.

> ''When they set forth once more, a cry of grief went up to heaven, the long plaintive wail, like a funeral coronach, was resumed…the sound seemed to re-echo through the whole wide valley … in one prolonged note of desolation.[198]'
>
> The cry you just heard is not one of biblical proportions. It is not Naomi's wail as she rounds the corner to Bethlehem. It is not the cry of those on sinking ships trying to reach safety on the far side of the Mediterranean. It is the cry of crofters forced from the Valley of Strath during the Highland Clearances. They were scattered to the far ends of the earth, eventually sending back letters from America. We know what it is to be displaced, for our mothers and fathers before us were people on the move.[199]

It was an unusual way to write a Christian Aid sermon and our sermons have become ever more localised to Scotland since that point. That same year, I contributed to a Christian Aid paper on the theology of migration. In that paper, we proposed that the 'idea of remaining in one place, stagnant and static, is alien both to the natural world and, as we shall see, to the Christian faith'.

I was later asked to speak in the church we were loosely attending about why I go to church. I called on Naomi again to explain how griefs – large and small – had detached me from the securities of faith. My honesty was apparently unusual. I had forgotten, in my exile from organised religion, that church is not necessarily a place where honest self-reflection thrives.

In 2019, I was invited to speak at a conference hosted by Glasgow University: Women and Gender in the Bible and in the Ancient World. Using portions of this creative thesis combined with a brief explanation of my methodology, I spoke about discovering that a woman's life is not linear. We are born, bear and are reborn; we are cared for and care. We mother and are mothered. We bend close to death long before it comes to take us to itself. We are not one but many selves. And in the melee of this multi-layered life, we are, to paraphrase Heather Walton, 'sometimes quite uncertain of either God's name or our own'.[200] Shortly afterwards, I was approached to adapt the paper for Radio 4 – but sadly this has not been followed through.

In 2020, mid-lockdown, I wrote to a small publishing house, Muddy Pearl, about whether they might be interested in publishing an alternative Naomi story. To my surprise, they replied positively. As a first step, they published my review of Alain Emerson's moving but male-oriented memoir, *Luminous Dark*. I wrote:

'The women of the Bible teach us that there is no healing when you grieve alone. You cannot grieve in the abstract. When we grieve alone, we are only aware of the darkness of the loss. When we bring our grief to someone else, their presence sheds a light in our dark corners. In some of those corners there is only dust and cobwebs. But in other corners are our dreams, our passions: the things that make us rejoice or rage until our belly hurts and our eyes water. As we allow others to hold up a little light against the darkness of our loss, we discover in those other corners a glimpse of our whole selves.'[201]

In the last few months, writing professionally in a freelance capacity has seemed more possible. I have, therefore developed a portfolio of work on my new website[202] and Instagram account.[203] Muddy Pearl has approached me to turn this

thesis into a book for their faith-based audience. We hope to restructure this work and intertwine stories of displaced women within it.

4.4 Listening more closely

Whilst I am grateful for the creative developments my research and writing have enabled, there are several areas which would have benefited from closer attention in this research: two of these are language and personalisation. They are not unrelated. Closer analysis and imitation of the language used in the Book of Ruth may have ensured a more attentive revisioning of the biblical text.

At Queen's University Belfast, in the winter of 1994, after my one – and as it turned out, only – Hebrew exam, I met with my professor. I thought I had failed the exam. He enquired if I would stay on to explore the book of Ruth. I couldn't think of a worse combination of language and story: I declined. That was my first mistake. Professor Beattie's Midrashic exegesis of the Book of Ruth underpins much of the modern interpretation and revisioning of the original story. I do not understand any of the original Hebrew and have, instead, leaned on Robert Alter's interpretation and explanation. As I have mentioned throughout this thesis, scholars such as Alter, Aschkenasy, Goitein, Brenner and Trible explore the use of language structure and form in great and intriguing detail. Much of this I have absorbed and attempted to recreate: gaps in the narrative; narrational economy; a sense of movement in the language and in the structure; and a distinctive female rhetoric. In terms of the latter, Aschkenasy discerns some instances within the Hebrew Bible where woman's language is much richer than men's. Her observation allows me to write for Naomi in a more 'inventive, elegant and metaphoric, loftier… style' than we might otherwise see in the terse, prosaic biblical text.[204] Aschkenasy's observation that female protagonists use cunning language to challenge and modify patriarchal rules by ostensibly submitting to them has also influenced my style.[205] Trible notes that the integrity of the Book of Ruth is born from the symmetry of the structure and the circular story-telling where 'meaning [is] as inseparable from form and content.'[206] A more perfect revisioning might have sought to mimic the chiastic

form and the call-and-response style of the text.[207] I might also have endeavoured - had time, energy and concentration allowed - to distinguish Naomi's older linguistic tics from Ruth's youthful inventiveness. An understanding of Hebrew would have helped to inform this.

Conclusion

The character of Naomi within the Book of Ruth is rarely held up as an example of biblical women. Her story is neither a condemned as a tale of terror or commended for divine bravery. It is perhaps too ordinary to be considered sacred. And yet, life is often no more than ordinary, and none the less holy for it. We see Naomis every day. They are world weary and wrinkled and unremarkable. They are the women holding families and friendships, communities and churches together. We need to hear more of Naomi. We need to witness hope rising from despair in the quiet rituals of living alongside each other. We need to recognise that we are complex and holy creatures: Naomi and Mara, mourning and fearful, defeated but hopeful.

Phyllis Trible best summarises the work of this thesis, my experience of grief, community and evolving faith over these last ten years. She identifies in the story of Naomi and Ruth the promise of a faith which can be challenged in order to be a catalyst for the faith development of women today.

> 'As a whole, this human comedy suggests a theological interpretation of feminism: women working out their salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in them. Naomi works as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Ruth and the females of Bethlehem work as paradigms for radicality. All together they are women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture. What they reflect, they challenge. And that challenge is a legacy of faith to this day for all who have ears to hear the stories of women in a man's world.' [208]

I began writing about Naomi, loss, grief and community long before the world was stunned by a virus. And while the story I write is an individual and personal one, perhaps there is some application for our collective trauma. What will we cry when we have come through the wilderness? What will we call ourselves when we arrive back in the place we once called home? Will it have been the rules, the lockdowns and bail-outs that save us? Or will it have been learning to

live in community, sharing home baking and learning that life – and faith – is a journey of many turns?

Ancient biblical stories, subject to the patriarchal agenda of the earliest writers, leave gaps in the telling. Within these gaps, women can flourish: ancient Israelite women can be brought into the foreground and contemporary women inspired by a lineage of foremothers and matriarchs. But as Irigaray observed, it is impossible to retell women's stories without reshaping the stories themselves.[209] Therefore, by exploring the context of women of faith and by retelling women's stories in our mother tongue, we may find room for new expressions of faith, spaces in which we can more easily belong.

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com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/view/10.1093/oso/9780198722618.001.0001/oso-9780198722618-chapter-19.

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Notes

[1] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 64. Throughout this work, I refer to Alter's translation of the Book of Ruth. All other Bible references are quoted in the New Revised Standard Version.

[2] Alter, 57. Havrelock, Patricia Karlin-Neumann and Alter believe that the book of Ruth is a quiet polemic against the opposition of Ezra/Nehemiah to intermarriage around 5th century on return to Judea.

[3] Alter, 62. And they came to the plains of Moab and they were there. And Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she, together with her two sons, was left. And they took for themselves Moabite wives. The name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. (Ruth 1:2-4)

[4] Alter, 62. And she went out from the place where she had been, with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to go back to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: 'Go back each of you to her mother's house. (Ruth 1:7-8)

[5] Alter, 67. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go, pray, to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after I find favour in his eyes". And she said to her, "Go, my daughter". And she went and came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers, *and it chanced that* she came upon the plot of Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. (Ruth 2:2-3. Italics mine.)

[6] Alter, 77. And he said to the redeeming kin, "Naomi, who came back from the plain of Moab, sold the parcel of the field that was our brother Elimelech's. And as for me, I thought, I shall alert you, saying 'Acquire it in the presence of those seated here and in the presence of my people's elders.' If you would redeem, redeem, and if you will not redeem,

tell me… And Boaz said, "On the day you acquire the field from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, to raise up the name of the dead name on his estate." (Ruth 4:3-6 with my abridging.)

[7] Alter, 76. And Boaz had gone up to the gate, and he sat down there, and look, the redeeming kin of whom Boaz spoke was passing by. (Ruth 4:1)

[8] Alter, 81. And Naomi took the child and placed him in her lap and became a nurse for him. (Ruth 4:16)

[9] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 66. Examples of this include observations by Caspi and Havrelock, Trible and Brenner. Caspi and Havrelock observe the call and response pattern where Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to go home and they refuse.

[10] Caspi and Havrelock, 189. Caspi and Havrelock observe that genealogies were used to "distract from the mythological aspects of the Bible. They assert a historical basis by referring to other biblical stories. The irony is that the stories to which they refer might be mythical, in which case, genealogies are an intricate attempt to create truth from fiction".

[11] Brenner, 'Naomi and Ruth,' 385.

[12] Brenner, 391.

[13] Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, 43.

[14] Ostriker, 47.

[15] Ostriker, 49.

[16] Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers*, 15.

[17] Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers*, Preface XIII

[18] Ostriker, 15.

[19] Jeffers, 'Forget It', 279.

[20] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 41.

[21] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 41.

[22] Jasper, 'Reflections on Reading the Bible', 82.

[23] Slee, *Praying like a Woman*, 71.

[24] 'The Bible for Normal People.' Ellen Davis: What Is the Practical Value of the Old Testament?', accessed June 2019.

[25] 'The Making of Unorthodox.', Accessed 17/08/2020.

[26] Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, 88.

[27] Danya Ruttenberg quoted in Kahn-Harris, 'The Inheritance of Gehinnom', 209.

[28] Rosen, 'Midrash, Bible, and Women's Voices', 428.
[29] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 77.

[30] Kahn-Harris, 'The Inheritance of Gehinnom', 205.

[31] Kahn-Harris, 205.

[32] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 4-5.

[33] Rosen, 'Midrash, Bible, and Women's Voices', 422.

[34] Held Evans, *Inspired*, 23.

[35] Rosen, 'Midrash, Bible, and Women's Voices', 423.

[36] Rosen, 425.

[37] Rosen, 426.

[38] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 91.

[39] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', 20.

[40] Walton, 'Calls to Preach: Constructing Vocational Theology', 64.

[41] Schol-Wetter, "My Mother Was a Wandering Aramaean", 5.

[42] Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography', 161.

[43] Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, 10.

[44] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 61–62.

[45] Alter, 65.

[46] Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, 168. Christ and Plaskow observe that one of the causes of *galut* (exile) is the alienation of the masculine from the feminine in God, the alienation of God and the Shechinah.

[47] Camp, 'Home of the Mother, Exile of the Father', 34.

[48] Alter, 63. No, my daughters, for it is far more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has come out against me." (Ruth 1:13)

[49] Alter, 64. And she saw that she was insisting on going with her, and she ceased speaking to her. (Ruth 1:18)

[50] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 166.

[51] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 64.

[52] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 150.

[53] Deuteronomy 5:1-33

[54] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 195.

[55] Caspi and Havrelock, 154.

[56] Alter, 80. May the LORD make the woman coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel. (Ruth 4:11)

[57] Joshua 3&4

[58] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 150.

[59] Matthew 3:13

[60] Held Evans, *Inspired*, 49.

[61] Exodus 3

[62] Genesis 33

[63] Genesis 16:15

[64] Genesis 21:15

[65] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 64.

[66] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 129.

[67] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 64.

[68] Kates and Reimer, 'Reading Ruth', 95.

[69] Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*, 149.

[70] Horowitz, *Voicing the Void: Muteness and Memory in Holocaust Fiction*.

[71] Lacocque, 'Subverting the Biblical World: Sociology and Politics in the Book of Ruth', 20. *Hesed* underpins the theology of the Book of Ruth where God is largely absent. Andre Lacoque describes *hesed* as the "virtue of excess", suggesting further that while "punctilious obedience to the Law is meritorious, …hesed surpasses personal merit and becomes contagious". Davis, 'All That You Say, I Will Do.', 7. Ellen Davis describes this exchange of kindness between God and humanity as the means through which the 'moral ecology of the world functions properly'. She observes with irony that Naomi's God who is 'reputed to be "abounding in *ḥesed*" (Ex. 34:6), could stand to learn something from" the foreigner, Ruth.

[72] Alter, 64. And she said, "Do not call me Naomi. Call me Mara, for Shaddai has dealt great bitterness to me. I went out full and empty did the LORD bring me back. Why should you call me Naomi when the LORD has borne witness against me and Shaddai has done me harm? (Ruth 1:20-21)

[73] Ruth 1:18-19

[74] Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 220.

[75] Emerson, *Luminous Dark*, 34.

[76] "Loss, Lockdown and a Certain Determined Light", muddypearl.com/loss-and-lockdown, July 2020

[77] Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*. Brown's sociological research on vulnerability and shame has been been an important part in my story journey outside of this thesis. This quote has been particularly influential. *'Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.'*

[78] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, 9. quoting Denzin 2003a, pp123-4). Question marks mine.

[79] Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography.' Accessed 23/8/2020

[80] Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church*, 126.

[81] Aisthorpe, 126.

[82] Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

[83] Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church*, 129.

[84] Aisthorpe, 127.

[85] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, 5.

[86] Bochner, 'On First-Person Narrative Scholarship', 161.

[87] Bochner, 160. (The quote to which Bochner refers from LeGuin relates to the tone of social science research papers. Arguably theological research is written in a similar style.)

[88] Kruse, 'Luce Irigaray's "Parler Femme" and American Metaphysics', 454.
[89] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, 8.

[90] Walton, 8.

[91] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 65.

[92] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 2.
[93] Bruce, 'Response-Ability: Identity in Alterity in the Book of Ruth.', 2.
[94] Herman, 'Truth, Truthiness, Memory, and Bald-Faced Lies-and the Pleasures of Uncertainty'.
[95] Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*.
[96] Herman, 'Truth, Truthiness, Memory, and Bald-Faced Lies-and the Pleasures of Uncertainty'.
[97] Molina, 'The Faith Lives of Women and Girls', 16.
[98] Schol-Wetter, 'My Mother Was a Wandering Aramaean', 340..
[99] Schol-Wetter, 330.
[100] Schol-Wetter, 331.
[101] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 65.

[102] Sohn, 'Verse by Verse', 18. Ruth H Sohn.

[103] Karlin-Neumann, 'The Journey toward Life', 127. Patricia Karlin-Neumann.

[104] Sohn, 'Verse by Verse', 19. Ruth H Sohn. Goitein, quoted in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* by Athalya Brenner also comments on the movement from tension to idyllic serenity and back to tension until all difficulties are resolved.

[105] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 69.

[106] Alter, 72.

[107] Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers*, 107.from footnote

[108] See Genesis: 38 for the story of Tamar, Judah and Perez. Perez is mentioned in the genealogy at the end of Ruth: 4.

[109] Kates, 'Women at the Center: Ruth and Shavuot', 196.

[110] Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken', 20.

[111] Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 74."Naomi's silence at Ruth's unshakeable commitment to accompany her is not unexpected. Moab is attempting to shake free of Moab and the calamity she associates with that place and its people. Resentment, irritation, frustration, unease may well lie behind her silence. Ruth the Moabite may even menace her future."

[112] Fein, 'Orpah'. 'You couldn't dream, raise sheep, marry somebody, draw your pail from a well, or name your child without being part of a scheme, some order, some promise, some plan, a grand design.'

[113] "The Book of Naomi and Ruth", Piercy, *Mars and Her Children*.

[114] Schol-Wetter, 'My Mother Was a Wandering Aramaean', 330.

[115] Schol-Wetter, 329.

[116] Schol-Wetter, 329 - parenthesis author's own – and 331.

[117] Ridley Scott and Khouri, 'Thelma and Louise'.

[118] Ridley Scott and Khouri.

[119] Lipsitz, 'The Atlantic'.

[120] Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth*, 175.

[121] Sohn, 'Verse by Verse', 18.

[122] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 65.

[123] Job 10:17 *adabra bemar nafshi – let me speak in the bitterness (mar) of my spirit*. Job uses the same word as Naomi uses to rename herself.

[124] Zornberg, 'The Concealed Alternative', 70.

[125] Schol-Wetter, 'My Mother Was a Wandering Aramaean', 339.

[126] Schol-Wetter, 339.

[127] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 76.

[128] Klagbrun, 'Sisters under the Skin', 266.

[129] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 64.

[130] Ozick, 'Ruth', 217.

[131] Ruth 1:16

[132] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 64.

[133] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 173.

[134] Zornberg, 'The Concealed Alternative', 66. Avivah Zornberg explores this metaphor of Naomi as chaff in her essay in *Reading Ruth*. She observes the implication of Naomi being the residue after the death of her husband, implying that he has been the *korban* sacrificed in incense and she now no more than ash.
Ozick, 'Ruth', 217.In the same book, Cynthia Ozick says that Rabbis 'identify [Elimelech] as a man of substance, distinguished, well-off, an eminence; but arrogant and selfish…' p217

[135] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 71. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. Exodus 15:23 (NRSV)

[136] Caspi and Havrelock, 11.

[137] Jeffers, 'Forget It'.

[138] Jeffers, 281.

[139] Jeffers, 279.

[140] Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 3.

[141] Meyers, 21.

[142] Meyers, 31.

[143] Meyers, 35.

[144] Meyers, 35.

[145] Meyers, 128.

[146] Meyers, 57.

[147] Meyers, 147.

[148] Meyers, 129.

[149] Meyers, 169.

[150] Meyers, 169.

[151] Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, 68.

[152] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, 68.

[153] Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*, 28.

[154] Baskin, 'Review of Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism', 16.

[155] Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 89..

[156] Baskin, 'Review of Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism,' 16.

[157] Numbers 27:1-11

[158] Aschkenasy, 'The Book of Ruth as Comedy', 31.

[159] Hirsch, 'Reading Ruth with Naomi', 314.

[160] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 65.

[161] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 201.

[162] Sohn, 'Verse by Verse', 18. "Remembering is applied to a woman and remembering is applied to rain; remembering is applied to a woman, as it is written And the Lord remembered Sarah [Gen 21:1] and remembering is applied to rain, as it is written You have remembered the earth and watered her, greatly enriching her with the river of God that is full of water£ [Psalm 65:10] (Babylon Talmud, Ta'anit 8a-8b)

[163] Reimer, 'Reading Ruth', 114. Reimer

[164] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 63–65. (Ruth 1:13, 20 & 2)

[165] Zornberg, 'The Concealed Alternative', 67.

[166] Kates, 'Women at the Center: Ruth and Shavuot', 193. It is easy to see why Judith A. Kates, in her essay *Women at the centre*, applies Shaddai's interpretation as goddess of fertility, progeny and prosperity to this verse. However, this interpretation of the name is widely disputed. Robert Alter observes that the name Shaddai may have been used here as an alternate form of YHWH within the poetic structure of these two scannable and parallel verses (Ruth 1:20-21). Alter, 65.

[167] Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark: Because God Often Shows up at Night*, 166.

[168] Davis, 'Beginning with Ruth', 9.

[169] Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 111.

[170] Karlin-Neumann, 'The Journey toward Life', 127.

[171] Karlin-Neumann, 127.

[172] Karlin-Neumann, 127.

[173] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 65.

[174] Caspi and Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 164.

[175] Alter, *Strong as Death Is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel, a Translation with Commentary*, 62.

[176] Zornberg, 'The Concealed Alternative', 79.

[177] Zornberg, 79.

[178] Zornberg, 73. Zornberg identifies four examples of food-related c*hesed* sourced from Midrash Vayikra Rabba 34:8. She defines them as: 1. doing *chesed* with people who don't need it (Gen 18:1-8); 2. not doing *chesed* with those who don't need it (Deut 23:5); 3. doing *chesed* with someone to whom much is owed (Exodus 2:20); 4. doing *chesed* with someone who needs it (Ruth 2:14)

[179] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, 166.

[180] Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography', 46

[181] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*, 95.

[182] Walton, 95.

[183] Walton, 76.

[184] Brenner, *Ruth and Esther*, 11.

[185] Held Evans, *Inspired*, 13.

[186] Kates and Reimer, *Reading Ruth*, 190.

[187] Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory : The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, 22.

[188] Braidotti, 14.

[189] Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 4.

[190] Gafney, 5

[191] Slee, Porter, and Phillips, *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls*, 27.

[192] Slee, Porter, and Phillips, 28.

[193] Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 11.

[194] Schüssler Fiorenza, 11.

[195] Brenner, *Ruth and Esther*, 10.

[196] Kierkegaard et al., *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, Volume 1: A-E*.

[197] Held Evans, *Inspired*, 106.

[198] David Craig, *The Crofter's Trail*, 27.

[199] Paragraph quoted from a Christian Aid Week sermon used in Scotland in 2018.

[200] Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection*.

[201] Clelland, "Loss, Lockdown and a Certain Determined Light", www.muddypearl.com/loss-and-lockdown

[202] Leanneclelland.co.uk

[203] '@leanneclellandwrites'.

[204] Aschkenasy, 'Language as Female Empowerment in Ruth', 111.

[205] Aschkenasy, 112.

[206] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 116.

[207] Trible, 188.

[208] Trible, 196.

[209] Kruse, 'Luce Irigaray's "Parler Femme" and American Metaphysics', 455.