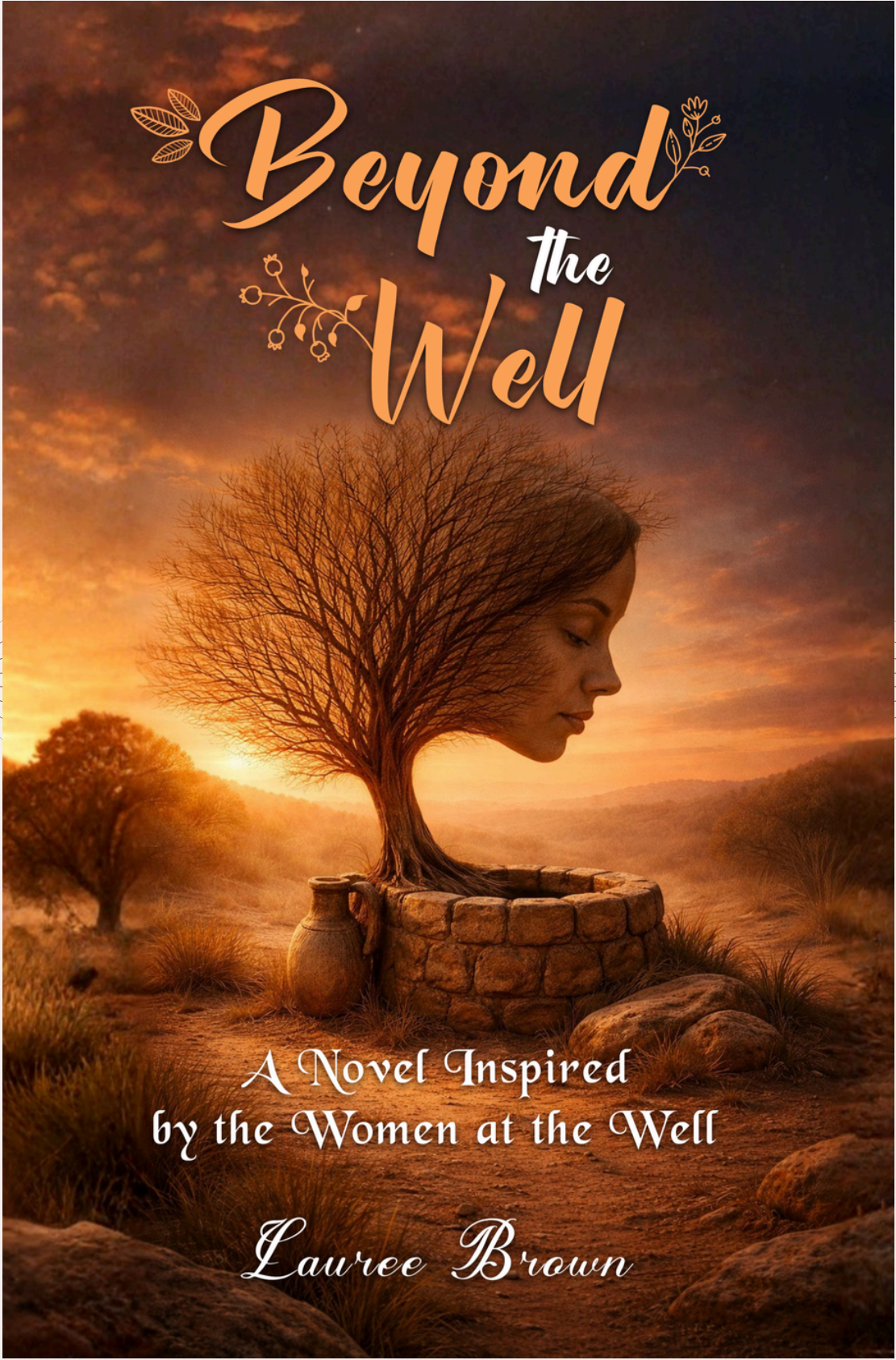

BOOK STUDY GUIDE



Beyond the Well

A Novel Inspired
by the Women at the Well

Lauriee Brown

BEYOND THE WELL — BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION & REFLECTION GUIDE

PURPOSE

THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO HELP READERS EXPLORE BEYOND THE WELL THROUGH CONVERSATION, REFLECTION, AND SHARED INSIGHT. IT CENTERS WOMEN'S VOICES, LIVED EXPERIENCE, RESILIENCE, AND TRANSFORMATION, INVITING READERS TO CONNECT THE STORY TO THEIR OWN LIVES AND TO THE WORLD AROUND THEM.

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THIS STUDY GUIDE IS INTENDED FOR PERSONAL AND GROUP DISCUSSION USE ONLY. IT MAY NOT BE SOLD, SUBLICENSED, OR ADAPTED FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES WITHOUT EXPRESS WRITTEN CONSENT.

BEYOND THE WELL AND ALL ASSOCIATED CHARACTERS, THEMES, AND NARRATIVE CONTENT ARE WORKS OF HISTORICAL FICTION. WHILE INSPIRED BY BIBLICAL TEXTS, HISTORICAL RESEARCH, AND CULTURAL CONTEXT, THIS WORK REPRESENTS A CREATIVE INTERPRETATION AND DOES NOT CLAIM TO PRESENT DEFINITIVE HISTORICAL OR THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS.

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES, WHEN INCLUDED, ARE USED FOR EDUCATIONAL AND LITERARY DISCUSSION PURPOSES.

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A Message from the Author

Beyond the Well was born out of a question that would not leave me alone:
What happens when we listen to the voices Scripture barely pauses to hear?
The Samaritan woman at the well appears briefly in the Gospel of John, yet her encounter with Jesus is one of the most intimate, disruptive, and transformative moments in the New Testament. Still, for centuries, her story has often been flattened—reduced to assumptions about sin, morality, or shame, rather than understood as a story of survival, intelligence, cultural tension, and awakening.

This book is an act of holy imagination grounded in history, anthropology, and compassion. It asks what her life might have been like before and after that moment at the well—what forces shaped her, what wounds she carried, and what courage it took to speak when silence was safer. It is also a story about women who live at the edges of power and yet carry deep reservoirs of wisdom, resilience, and agency.

I wrote Beyond the Well not to provide answers, but to open space—for conversation, for reflection, for recognizing ourselves in places we were never taught to look. My hope is that reading this story together invites you into deeper listening: to the text, to one another, and to the voices—ancient and present—that rise from the margins.

May this book club journey be one of curiosity rather than certainty, compassion rather than judgment, and transformation rather than conclusion. May you find echoes of your own story here—and may those echoes remind you that voice, once found, cannot be taken away.

~Rev. Dr. Lauree Brown

How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to support thoughtful, honest, and compassionate conversation around *Beyond the Well*. Whether your book club gathers in a living room, library, café, or online space, this workbook is meant to serve as a companion—not a requirement.

You do not need to complete every question or activity. Instead, allow the group to move at the pace that feels right. Some chapters may spark long discussions; others may invite quiet reflection. Both are welcome.

Each section of the guide typically includes:

- Reflection Questions to deepen understanding of the story, characters, and themes
- Discussion Prompts to encourage shared insight and multiple perspectives
- Personal Reflections for private journaling or optional sharing
- Optional Practices (such as creative, contemplative, or embodiment prompts) for groups who enjoy experiential engagement

You may choose to discuss one chapter per meeting or group several chapters together by theme. You may also focus on specific themes (trauma, identity, power, voice, resilience) rather than reading linearly.

This guide assumes that readers bring different life experiences, beliefs, and levels of familiarity with trauma-informed or spiritually reflective material. There are no “right” answers here. Curiosity, listening, and respect are more important than agreement.

Because *Beyond the Well* engages themes of marginalization, grief, survival, and transformation, it's encouraged to establish group agreements around confidentiality and respect. Allow participants to pass on questions if they choose and take breaks when conversations feel heavy. Then, end each session grounded—in gratitude, silence, or shared intention.

Most importantly, let this guide support connection. The heart of a book club is not analysis alone, but the way story opens space for empathy, memory, and shared humanity.

Read gently. Speak honestly. Listen deeply.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 1

Chapters 1–3: The Making of a Woman at the Margins

Purpose:

These chapters are not about the well yet—they are about why the well matters. Readers should resist rushing to meaning and instead sit with formation: how Photine becomes someone shaped by abandonment, violence, and forced adaptation.

Core Themes This Week:

- Social exclusion and communal shame
- Early trauma and formative loss
- Patriarchy, power, and silence
- Survival strategies vs. agency
- The cost of being “too much” or “too capable” as a girl

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What stayed with you emotionally after reading these chapters?
- Which moment felt hardest to read—and why?
- Did Photine feel familiar to you, or distant? In what ways?

Section II: Power, Gender, and Silence

- How does Photine learn early what is “permitted” for women and what is punished?
- In what ways does silence function as both protection and erasure for her?
- Zimri and Mordecai represent different kinds of male power. How do they differ—and how are they the same?

Section III: Trauma and Survival

- Which losses shape Photine the most: her father’s disappearance, her forced marriage, or the violence she endures? Why?
- Where do you see Photine adapting rather than resisting—and where do you see quiet resistance forming?
- How does intelligence function as both a gift and a liability for her?

Section IV: Identity and Becoming

- At this point in the story, does Photine see herself as having choices? Why or why not?
- What parts of her identity are imposed—and what parts does she guard fiercely?
- How do these chapters challenge romanticized ideas of “biblical womanhood”?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Where have you seen women expected to endure rather than speak?
- What does survival look like when open resistance is not possible?
- Have you ever been told—directly or indirectly—that you were “too much”?

Closing Thought for the Week

Before Photine ever meets Jesus, she has already learned how the world treats women who do not fit neatly into its rules. These opening chapters invite us to slow down and sit with her life as it is—fractured, constrained, and resilient. For readers who carry their own histories of violence, abuse, or oppression, this story does not ask you to minimize what you have survived or to hurry toward redemption. Photine’s endurance is not weakness, and her silence is not consent—it is strategy, adaptation, and survival in a world that punishes women for visibility.

This part of the journey honors the truth that healing is rarely linear and never owed on demand. Strength may look like patience, watchfulness, or simply staying alive another day. As you read, you are invited to notice where the story resonates and where it asks for gentleness—toward Photine, and toward yourself. You may pause, step back, or return when ready. Nothing here requires you to relive pain to prove understanding.

These chapters remind us that transformation does not begin at the moment of encounter—it begins much earlier, in the quiet, unseen acts of endurance that make survival itself a form of courage.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 2

Chapters 4-6: Survival Is Not Silence

Purpose:

These chapters move Photine out of her childhood home and into marriage, but they do not offer rescue. Instead, they explore how survival often requires choosing between harms. This section invites readers to sit with displacement, coerced transitions, and the fragile spaces where protection and captivity blur. The focus is not romance, but endurance—how Photine learns to live inside constraints without surrendering her inner self.

Core Themes This Week

- Forced transition and loss of bodily autonomy
- Marriage as survival rather than choice
- Silence, complicity, and constrained kindness
- The difference between safety and freedom
- Watching, waiting, and the slow forming of resolve

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What emotions surfaced as Photine leaves Akrabbim and travels to En-dor?
- Did any moment surprise you with its quietness rather than its violence?
- How did your feelings toward Jotham evolve across these chapters?

Section II: Power, Protection, and Control

- In what ways does marriage offer Photine protection—and in what ways does it restrict her further?
- How does Jotham's gentleness differ from the cruelty of Mordecai and Matthias? Why is that distinction important?
- Where do you see power exercised subtly rather than overtly in this household?

Section III: Trauma, Silence, and Watching

- Photine learns to observe carefully rather than react. How is this a trauma response—and how is it also preparation?
- How do the women (Leah, Lois, Photine) create small pockets of care within an unsafe system?
- What is the cost of survival when resistance is delayed rather than immediate?

Section IV: Identity Under Constraint

- Does Photine experience this stage of her life as rest, exile, or something in between?
- What parts of herself remain untouched by marriage and household expectations?
- How does her anger change in these chapters—does it soften, sharpen, or deepen?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever entered a situation that felt safer than what came before, but still not free?
- Where have you learned to “be quiet” in order to stay protected?
- Have you ever mistaken endurance for peace?

Closing Thought for the Week

Chapters 4–6 remind us that not all harm is loud, and not all protection is freedom. Photine’s marriage to Ezra does not heal her—but it buys her time. In trauma-informed terms, this is a season of stabilization rather than transformation. She is no longer in immediate danger, yet she is not restored. Her silence here is not submission; it is assessment.

And still, something unexpected appears. In a world where women’s survival depended almost entirely on male protection and provision, what Photine finds with Ezra, though imperfect and constrained, is not nothing. It is safety without cruelty. It is labor shared without domination. It is affection without demand. In a life shaped by violence and dispossession, this measure of peace is a gift—not freedom, but a rare reprieve.

For readers who have lived through abuse or coercion, these chapters may feel uncomfortably familiar. They honor a truth often overlooked: many survivors do not flee immediately, not because they are weak, but because they are discerning. Photine is learning the terrain of power, the limits of kindness, and the cost of speaking too soon. She is learning what rest feels like, even when it is partial.

This week does not ask readers to admire endurance as virtue. It asks us to recognize it as necessity—and to acknowledge the grace that can exist even inside constrained choices. Transformation has not yet arrived, but something vital is forming beneath the surface: awareness, discernment, and the slow reclaiming of self.

Like Photine, you are not required to act before you are ready. Watching is not failure. Waiting is not surrender. Sometimes, in a world that offers women so little room to breathe, finding peace where you can is not settling—it is surviving with wisdom.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 3

Chapters 7-8: The Watchful Life: Choosing to Stay When the World Tightens

Purpose:

These chapters mark a turning point—not because Photine is suddenly free, but because she stops running. The story shifts from survival in motion to survival through resolve.

Readers are invited to notice how courage can look quiet, strategic, and grounded rather than dramatic or defiant. This week is about choosing to stand—even when the ground is unstable.

Core Themes This Week:

- Choosing presence over flight
- Agency emerging from exhaustion
- Courage without certainty
- The cost of returning home
- Resistance through rootedness
- Power, surveillance, and looming empire

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What emotional tone did these chapters carry for you—fear, determination, grief, relief?
- What moment signaled to you that Photine was no longer running?
- Did her decision to return feel brave, reckless, inevitable, or something else?

Section II: Agency and Choice

- Photine chooses to stop fleeing even though danger remains. What motivates this decision?
- How is agency different here than in earlier chapters where she was reacting to harm?
- What does it mean to choose where you stand, even when you cannot control outcomes?

Section III: Trauma, Memory, and the Body

- How does Photine's body respond to the idea of return—what does she feel physically or instinctively?
- In what ways do past losses (her father, Jotham, Lois) inform her present resolve?
- How does trauma shape not just fear, but clarity?

Section IV: Power, Empire, and Surveillance

- What signs of Roman presence and control appear in these chapters?
- How does the awareness of empire change the stakes of everyday life?
- In what ways is “returning home” an act of resistance under occupation?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever reached a point where running felt more dangerous than staying?
- What does it look like to choose stillness instead of escape?
- Have you ever made a decision without knowing if it would work—only that you could not continue as before?

Closing Thought for the Week

Chapters 7–8 remind us that courage does not always roar. Sometimes it arrives as fatigue that has sharpened into clarity. Photine does not return because she believes the world has changed—but because she has. She understands the risks, the power structures, the surveillance, and the cost. And still, she chooses to stand.

For readers shaped by trauma, this moment honors a difficult truth: there comes a time when fleeing no longer preserves life—it fractures it. Photine’s return is not naïve hope or spiritual optimism. It is an embodied decision to stop letting fear dictate movement.

This week does not glorify sacrifice or promise safety. It honors discernment. It recognizes that agency can emerge not from confidence, but from exhaustion that finally refuses to be scattered. Watching, waiting, and choosing one’s ground are not passive acts—they are forms of resistance.

You are not required to move before you are ready. But when movement stops, it may be because something within you has quietly decided: This is where I stand.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 4

Chapters 9-11: When Power Comes Back Wearing a Uniform

Purpose:

These chapters mark a decisive shift in the story: private harm becomes public threat. The danger Photine has learned to manage within households now reappears in the form of empire—organized, sanctioned, and impossible to ignore. This week asks readers to examine how systems of power recycle personal violence, and how survival becomes more complex when the past returns with authority behind it.

Core Themes This Week:

- The return of unresolved trauma
- Power aligned with empire and masculinity
- Betrayal as a form of violence
- The illusion of protection under authority
- Fear, vigilance, and moral injury
- When silence is no longer enough

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What emotional shift did you feel as Mordecai reentered the story?
- Did these chapters feel heavier, faster, or more frightening than earlier sections? Why?
- What sense of foreboding—or inevitability—did you experience as events unfolded?

Section II: Power, Empire, and Authority

- How is Mordecai changed by Rome—and how is he the same?
- What does his return reveal about how empire rewards cruelty, control, or ambition?
- How do these chapters complicate the idea that power brings safety or order?

Section III: Trauma Reactivated

- How does Photine's body and awareness respond to the reappearance of an old threat?
- In what ways does past trauma sharpen her perception rather than weaken it?
- Where do you see fear operating as information rather than panic?

Section IV: Survival, Choice, and Moral Cost

- What options are realistically available to Photine at this stage—and which are illusions?
- How does survival now require discernment not just of people, but of systems?
- Where do you see the cost of waiting, staying quiet, or hoping authority will restrain itself?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever experienced a situation where harm returned with legitimacy or power behind it?
- How does your body respond when the past resurfaces unexpectedly?
- What does it mean to trust your instincts when danger wears a respectable face?

Closing Thought for the Week

Chapters 9–11 confront us with a painful truth: personal violence rarely ends—it evolves. When Mordecai returns aligned with Rome, the threat is no longer confined to a household or a single man. It is systemic, protected, and emboldened. For Photine, this is not merely the resurfacing of fear; it is the recognition that survival now requires vigilance on an entirely different scale.

For readers shaped by trauma, these chapters may resonate deeply. They acknowledge how safety can fracture when abusers gain power, credibility, or institutional backing. This part of the story does not ask readers to be brave in loud or heroic ways. It honors the quiet, exhausting labor of staying alert, protecting others, and weighing every move when the cost of misjudgment is high.

Transformation has not yet arrived—but clarity has. And clarity, though heavy, is often the first step toward reclaiming agency. You are not weak for feeling the weight of these chapters. You are not failing if you need to pause. Awareness itself is a form of strength, especially in a world that teaches the vulnerable to doubt what they see.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 5

Chapters 12-13: When the World Breaks

Purpose:

These chapters mark a rupture. What has been tense becomes catastrophic. Power no longer threatens—it destroys. This week is not about meaning making or lessons learned; it is about bearing witness to devastation without explanation or spiritual bypassing. Readers are invited to slow down, to grieve, and to acknowledge that some losses are not survivable in the way we wish they were.

Core Themes This Week:

- State violence and absolute power
- Collective punishment and moral collapse
- Grief without resolution
- Trauma as rupture, not transformation
- Survival when meaning shatters

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What was your physical or emotional response while reading these chapters?
- Where did you feel overwhelmed, numb, or unable to continue?
- Did you notice any instinct to rush forward, skim, or emotionally detach?

Section II: Power, Empire, and Moral Injury

- How does Mordecai's return embody the full weight of empire rather than personal cruelty alone?
- What happens when violence is justified as "order," "law," or "necessity"?
- Where do you see innocence erased—not only in death, but in the survivors?

Section III: Grief and Witness

- Which loss affected you most, and why?
- How does the story resist giving closure, justice, or comfort?
- What does it mean to witness suffering when nothing can be fixed?

Section IV: Trauma Without Meaning

- These chapters do not offer redemption or explanation. How did that feel as a reader?
- Where do we struggle most with stories that refuse resolution?
- What does it mean to honor pain without trying to redeem it?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever experienced a loss that changed the shape of your life rather than teaching you something?
- What helps you stay present with grief—your own or others’—without needing it to “make sense”?
- Where do you notice the impulse to look away?

Closing Thought for the Week

Chapters 12–13 do not ask readers to find hope. They ask us to stay. To sit beside devastation without reaching for explanations, theology, or consolation too quickly. This is not the moment of healing—it is the moment of shattering.

For readers carrying histories of violence, loss, or systemic harm, these chapters may feel destabilizing. You are not required to finish them in one sitting, to analyze them, or to be “strong.” Grief is not a failure of faith or resilience; it is a truthful response to what should never have happened.

Photine does not emerge from this moment wiser or healed. She emerges altered. Something irrevocable has occurred—not only in her life, but in the moral landscape around her. Survival, from this point forward, will mean carrying the dead without answers and continuing to breathe in a world that no longer resembles the one she knew.

This week honors the truth that some chapters of life are not about growth—but about endurance, memory, and refusing to let what was lost be forgotten.

A Personal Note from the Author:

Chapters 12 and 13 were the hardest for me to write.

I could not approach them all at once. I had to take them in baby steps—first framing what needed to be told, then stepping away. I returned to add detail, then stepped back again. Each pass required space, care, and time. And every time I came back to these chapters, I cried.

Not because I doubted their place in the story, but because naming loss, violence, and irreversible endings demands honesty. And honesty costs something.

I want you to know that these chapters were written slowly on purpose. Nothing here is meant to shock or rush you forward. Grief does not move on a schedule, and neither does healing. If you need to pause, linger, reread, or step away entirely, that is not failure—it is wisdom.

This part of the story holds death, yes, but it also holds love, memory, and the unbearable weight of what cannot be undone. I ask only that you move through it with the same gentleness I had to learn to give myself while writing it.

You are allowed to take your time here.

Honoring the Dead: Caleb, Ezra, Elior.

These names are not symbols. They are lives—lived briefly, imperfectly, and with love.

In the world of Beyond the Well, their deaths are not anomalies. They reflect a historical reality that is often softened or skipped over in biblical storytelling: first-century Jewish and Samaritan families lived under constant Roman surveillance, taxation, conscription, and threat. Violence was not rare, and justice was unevenly applied—especially to those already marginalized.

Children died. Husbands were taken. Rebels were crushed publicly as warnings. Families were shattered not because they were exceptional, but because they were ordinary. Roman power operated through fear, spectacle, and disposability. Jewish households—especially those with any perceived connection to resistance, dissent, or noncompliance—lived with a daily calculus of risk. Safety was provisional. Stability was fragile. Grief was communal and frequent.

These chapters honor not only the characters named, but the countless unnamed lives lost to empire, oppression, and silence. A Gentle Invitation to the reader. You are not asked to analyze these chapters quickly or to extract meaning on demand. You are invited to witness.

To sit with what was lost. To acknowledge the cost of survival. To recognize that love, once formed, does not disappear simply because the beloved is gone.

For some readers, this section may stir personal grief or trauma. Please know you are not required to relive anything to continue. You may read slowly, skip ahead, or return later. This story trusts your pacing. These chapters exist because the dead deserve remembrance—and because the living deserve space to mourn them.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 6

Chapters 14-16: After the Fire: Grief, Fragmentation, and Survival

Purpose:

These chapters take place after everything has already been lost. They are not about rebuilding yet—they are about what happens after catastrophe, when grief disorients identity and survival becomes improvisation. This week invites readers to sit with rupture: how Photine survives when love, family, and future have been burned away.

Core Themes This Week:

- Acute grief and traumatic aftermath
- Dissociation, obsession, and fractured identity
- Survival through manipulation and adaptation
- Women's communal spaces as refuge and containment
- Power, scarcity, and moral compromise
- Return to Sychar as reckoning, not homecoming

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What emotions dominated these chapters for you: grief, numbness, anger, confusion?
- Did you notice moments where Photine feels absent from herself? Where?
- What felt most unsettling—not because it was violent, but because it was quiet?

Section II: Grief Without Resolution

- How does Photine's grief differ from earlier losses in her life?
- What does it mean that she obsesses over her father now—after Ezra and Eloir are gone?
- Where do you see grief expressed directly, and where is it displaced or redirected?

Section III: Survival and Moral Ambiguity

- Barshai represents a different kind of power than the men before him. How does Photine read and use that power?
- How do these chapters complicate simple ideas of “right” and “wrong” behavior under oppression?
- In what ways is manipulation presented not as cruelty, but as strategy?

Section IV: Women, Shelter, and Fragmented Belonging

- What role does the women's home play in Photine's survival?
- How do women support one another here—explicitly or implicitly?
- Does this space feel like healing, hiding, or holding? Why?

Section V: Returning to Sychar

- What does it mean for Photine to return to Sychar with Donel?
- Is this return a failure, a necessity, or a confrontation?
- How has Photine changed in ways the town cannot see—or refuses to see?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever survived a season where your choices were about endurance, not integrity?
- Where have you seen grief make people sharper, quieter, or more distant rather than softer?
- What does it mean to live when the future you imagined no longer exists?

Closing Thought for the Week

Chapters 14–16 do not offer closure—and they are not meant to. They honor the truth that after profound loss, the self does not return intact. Grief fractures time, memory, and identity. Photine is not “healing” yet; she is surviving in pieces.

For readers who carry their own histories of trauma, these chapters affirm something rarely spoken aloud: that survival after devastation may involve moral compromise, emotional numbness, or behaviors that make sense only in the context of scarcity and fear. This story does not ask you to judge Photine—or yourself—for the ways you stayed alive.

In a world where women's safety depended on attachment, negotiation, and careful reading of power, Photine's strategies are not failures of character. They are evidence of intelligence under pressure. There is no demand here to be whole, noble, or forgiven. Sometimes survival looks like fragmentation. Sometimes it looks like watching, waiting, and choosing the least dangerous path. Sometimes it looks like returning—not because it is safe, but because there is nowhere else to go.

This week invites gentleness, for the characters, and for yourself. You are not required to resolve grief to understand it. You are allowed to read slowly, pause often, and step away when needed. The story will wait.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 7

Chapters 17-19: The Circle of the Unseen

Purpose:

These chapters gather what has been scattered. Before the public encounter at the well, Photine finds herself among others who live outside the center of power, women marked by loss, men carrying grief quietly, households stitched together by necessity rather than status. This week invites readers to notice how healing often begins not in miracles, but in community: shared meals, shared labor, shared watchfulness. The well is approaching, but first, belonging is rehearsed.

Core Themes This Week:

- Chosen family and survival-based community
- Shared marginalization and mutual recognition
- Safety, witness, and the slow rebuilding of trust
- Women's wisdom passed horizontally, not hierarchically
- The courage of visibility after long concealment

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What moments of tenderness or connection stood out to you most in these chapters?
- How did the presence of other outcasts change the emotional tone of the story?
- Did anything in this section feel unexpectedly gentle—or unexpectedly difficult?

Section II: Community as Shelter

- How does life with Donel, Ephram, and the women differ from Photine's earlier households?
- What role do shared tasks (food, water, stories, children) play in creating safety?
- Where do you see trust forming slowly rather than being demanded?

Section III: Trauma, Witness, and Voice

- Photine has learned to survive alone. What does it cost her to begin surviving with others?
- How do the other women reflect parts of Photine's own story back to her?
- Why might collective presence be necessary before individual transformation?

Section IV: Identity on the Threshold

- At this point, how does Photine understand herself differently than she did earlier in the story?
- What fears still remain as she moves closer to the center of town—and visibility?
- What does it mean now that Donel is willing to let her go? Why does she hesitate?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever found healing not through answers, but through being believed?
- Where have you experienced community as a form of protection?
- What parts of yourself only surface when you feel safe among others?

Closing Thought for the Week

Chapters 17–19 remind us that transformation rarely begins alone. Before Photine speaks publicly, before she is seen by the town or named by Jesus, she is first held—by women who understand silence, by men who do not demand ownership, by children who ask honest questions without judgment.

For readers shaped by trauma, this week honors a quiet truth: safety often comes before revelation. Healing requires witnesses. Community does not erase grief or fear, but it steadies the body enough to step forward when the moment arrives.

As Donel prepares to let her go, Photine feels both relief and loss. Even kindness can unsettle a life built on endurance. Not all release feels like rescue. Some forms of care ask us to mourn what we no longer need.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 8

Chapters 20-22: Living Water Made Visible

Purpose:

These chapters reveal that transformation does not end at revelation—it must be embodied. The encounter at the well ignites change, but what follows tests whether truth can survive community scrutiny, political threat, and the weight of history. This week invites readers to reflect on what happens after we are seen: how courage becomes practice, how witness becomes responsibility, and how healing moves from the private to the communal.

Core Themes This Week

- Encounter as recognition, not correction
- Truth-telling without humiliation
- Public witness and personal cost
- Community repair and shared responsibility
- The kingdom as table, not hierarchy

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What moment in these chapters felt most powerful or tender to you?
- How did the scene at the well differ from how you've heard this story told before?
- What surprised you about what happens after Photine speaks?

Section II: Being Seen Without Shame

- How does Jesus see Photine differently than others have throughout her life?
- Why is it significant that her story is named without condemnation or spectacle?
- What does it mean that her jars are filled when she returns—by others?

Section III: Voice, Risk, and Public Truth

- What risks does Photine take by speaking openly at the well?
- How does she balance honesty with wisdom in a politically dangerous setting?
- Where do you see courage expressed not as defiance, but as steadiness?

Section IV: Community, Repair, and the Everyday Sacred

- How does the shared meal function as part of the healing process?
- What role do Mary, Ephram, Danel, and the children play in sustaining what begins at the well?
- How does the image of the table reshape your understanding of “the kingdom of God”?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever told the truth and been surprised by how others responded?
- Where have you seen healing continue through ordinary acts rather than dramatic moments?
- What would it mean for your voice to be a lamp rather than a weapon?

Closing Thought for the Week

Chapters 20–22 remind us that living water does not remain hidden underground. It surfaces—in voices reclaimed, in meals shared, in small acts of courage that resist erasure. Photine’s encounter does not isolate her from community; it restores her to it.

She is not rescued away from her world but returned to it with truth in her hands. For readers shaped by trauma, these chapters offer a gentle assurance: revelation does not demand perfection, and healing does not erase fear. It asks only for presence—for standing where you are, with what you know, and letting others meet you there.

The well becomes more than a site of encounter. It becomes a hearth. And the kingdom is no longer an idea to defend, but a practice to live—one voice, one table, one act of courage at a time.

Book Club Study Guide – Week 9

Chapters 23 +: The Well, The Hill, and the Return

Purpose:

This final chapter does not offer a neat ending—it offers a rooted one. Photine’s story culminates not in escape from history, but in reintegration: with her brother, her community, her body, and her future. The encounter with Jesus does not erase her past; it reframes it in truth and dignity. This week invites readers to consider what it means to be seen without being consumed, forgiven without being diminished, and restored without being returned to silence.

The well becomes what it was always meant to be: not a place of exposure or shame, but a site of recognition, voice, and shared labor.

Core Themes This Week

- Public truth-telling and moral courage
- Accountability without annihilation
- Forgiveness as work, not sentiment
- Community as continuation of healing
- Repair rather than erasure
- The future built through ordinary faithfulness

Section I: First Impressions (Grounding Questions)

- What emotions surfaced most strongly as Photine speaks publicly?
- How did this ending differ from what you expected—or feared?
- Which moment felt most “earned” rather than miraculous?

Section II: Voice, Truth, and Public Witness

- What does it cost Photine to speak her story aloud—and what does it give her?
- How does Jesus respond differently than religious or political authorities often do?
- Why is it significant that her truth is not turned into spectacle, theology, or moral lesson?
- What does it mean that Jesus steps back rather than centering himself?

Section III: Truth, Limits, and Non-Reconciliation

- How does Photine control the terms of the encounter with her brother rather than allowing it to become reconciliation on demand?
- What is the significance of her listening without promising relationship, repair, or restoration?
- Why might naming harm and setting limits be more truthful than offering forgiveness prematurely?
- How does the exchange of the olive-wood shard function as acknowledgment rather than absolution?
- What power does Photine reclaim by ending the interaction without resolution?

Section IV: Embodiment, Future, and Continuity

- Why does the pregnancy matter thematically at the end of the story?
- How does Photine's fatigue and physical limitation challenge triumphalist narratives of healing?
- What kind of future is being built here—and what kind is intentionally not promised?
- How does the ending resist both despair and false hope?

Optional Reflection (Personal, Not Required)

- Have you ever told the truth publicly and discovered it did not fix everything—but it fixed something?
- Where have you experienced accountability that required effort rather than apology?
- What does “repair” look like in your own life—in family, community, or faith?
- What would it mean to build a future that honors the past without being trapped by it?

Closing Thought for the Week:

This chapter resists a familiar religious impulse: the rush to reconciliation. Photine does not forgive, restore, or reconcile. She does something quieter and harder—she allows truth to be spoken, names the harm done to her, and then ends the exchange on her own terms.

The olive-wood shard is not a symbol of reunion. It is a boundary. A witness. A way of saying: the past is acknowledged, but it does not own my future.

For readers shaped by trauma, this moment offers permission rarely granted in sacred stories: you may listen without fixing, name harm without repairing it, and walk away without guilt. Forgiveness, if it ever comes, is not owed in the moment of confession. Repair is not guaranteed by apology. And reconciliation is not the measure of spiritual maturity. Sometimes the most faithful act is clarity.

Photine leaves the hillside not reconciled—but unburdened. And that, too, is a form of freedom.

Overarching Questions for the Entire Novel

Formation and Survival

- How does the novel redefine survival as intelligence, strategy, and moral endurance?
- Where does Photine adapt in ways that protect her—and where does adaptation cost her?
- How does the story challenge the idea that suffering automatically produces virtue?

Women, Power, and Patriarchy

- How do different male figures represent different forms of power—religious, domestic, economic, imperial?
- In what ways are women expected to absorb harm for the sake of order or reputation?
- How does the novel dismantle romanticized versions of “biblical womanhood”?

Trauma and Healing

- How does the novel model trauma-informed storytelling without retraumatizing the reader?
- Why does healing unfold communally rather than privately?
- What does the novel teach about timing, readiness, and consent in transformation?

Community and Repair

- What kinds of communities enable healing—and which ones endanger it?
- How does the novel portray forgiveness as relational work rather than emotional resolution?
- What does justice look like when punishment is not the goal?

Final Reflection: Beyond Photine — Obscure Women and Sacred Resistance

Photine's story is not singular. She stands in a long lineage of women whose courage was not always loud but was always costly.

Women like Rizpah, who guarded the bodies of her sons against erasure.

Like Huldah, whose prophetic authority outpaced kings.

Like Zipporah, who intervened to save a life when God's covenant faltered.

Like Jehosheba, who hid a child-king from massacre and altered history through quiet defiance.

These women were not celebrated for submission. They were dangerous because they remembered, intervened, endured, and acted within systems designed to erase them.

Beyond the Well belongs to this tradition. It is not simply a retelling—it is a reclamation. It insists that feminism and faith are not opposites, that heroism is often domestic and invisible, and that resistance sometimes looks like staying alive long enough to speak.

The well, in the end, is not just a place of encounter.

It is a reminder: women have always been there, waiting, watching, surviving, and shaping the story long before they were allowed to tell it.

Sneak Peek: Beyond the Touch (working title)

For twelve years, she learned how to disappear without leaving.

They called her unclean.

She called herself alive.

Every rule told her to stop hoping.

Everybody told her to stay still.

But something in her refused to loosen its grip.

She did not ask.

She did not wait.

She did not remain invisible.

She reached—not with permission, but with audacity.

Not with certainty, but with resolve.

Because faith, she learned, is not always sanctioned or serene.

Sometimes it is defiant.

Sometimes it is survival.

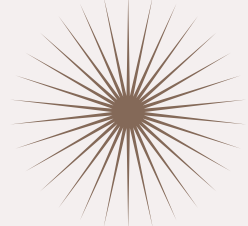
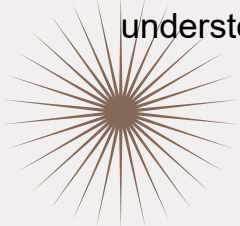
Sometimes it is the radical belief that you are worth healing - even when the world has decided you are not.

Beyond the Well: A Study Guide invites readers to journey alongside Photine—the Samaritan woman whose life unfolds long before she ever meets Jesus. This guide is not about rushing toward redemption or flattening pain into metaphor. It is about witnessing survival, agency, and transformation in real time.

Through trauma-informed reflection, historical context, and thoughtful discussion questions, this study guide explores themes of women in the margins, power and patriarchy, endurance and resistance, grief and community, and the courage it takes to become visible after long concealment. Designed for book clubs, small groups, classrooms, and individual readers, it honors the lived experiences of those who have known silence, loss, and adaptation.

Beyond the Well does not ask readers to fix Photine—or themselves. It asks them to slow down, to listen, and to recognize that healing often begins not with miracles, but with dignity, witness, and choice.

This guide welcomes feminist readers, faith-adjacent readers, and those carrying complicated spiritual histories. You may pause. You may skip. You may return when ready. Nothing here requires suffering to be redeemed in order to be understood.



About the Author:

Lauree Brown is a writer, scholar, and licensed minister whose work explores trauma, spirituality, women's voices, and the spaces where theology, psychology, and lived experience intersect. She holds a Master of Divinity and a Ph.D. in Metaphysical Theology, with academic training in psychology and anthropology.

As the author of Beyond the Well, Lauree brings both rigorous historical research and deep compassion to the stories of women long reduced to footnotes. Her writing centers those who survived systems that were never designed for their flourishing—and refuses to romanticize endurance while still honoring it.

Lauree's work is shaped by decades of exploration, trauma-informed practice, and advocacy for marginalized communities. She writes for readers who are thoughtful, questioning, and unwilling to accept easy answers—especially when it comes to faith, power, and women's lives.