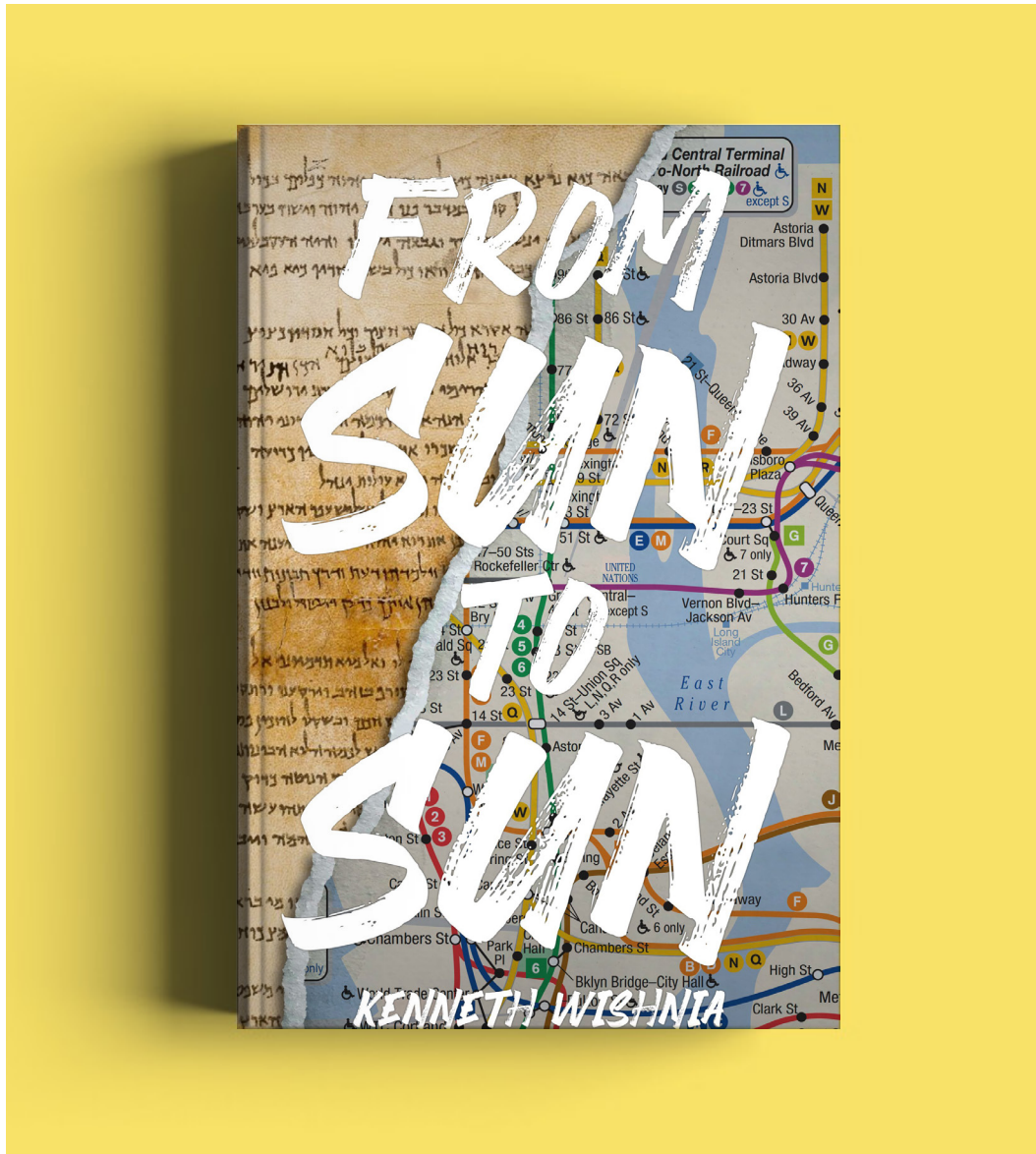


# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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# Author's Note

I've always been drawn to stories with strong female protagonists, and boy is Ruth a strong protagonist! In general, women don't have much of a voice in the Hebrew Bible, but when they choose to speak up, they make demands, and those demands are listened to. Consider the audacity of the "witch of En-Dor" when she commands King Saul to pay attention to her words, essentially saying, "I listened to you, now you listen to me" (Samuel 28:21-22). No Egyptian ever spoke to Pharaoh like that!

Ruth is similarly determined: when her mother-in-law Naomi tells her to go back to her people and her gods, Ruth's response is blunt and direct: "Don't tell me to go. I'm going with you. Your people are my people. Your God is my God." She gives up her cultural identity (and any attendant privileges) to go with Naomi to a new land, and when they arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth doesn't ask permission to go and glean in the fields, she plainly states her intention to do so. And when Naomi tells her to go to the threshing floor and crawl into bed with Boaz, Naomi says, "He will tell you what to do." But it is Ruth who tells Boaz what to do.

I'm also pretty sure I'm the first person in history to have read the biblical Book of Ruth and thought, Great setup for a crime novel. After all, three men die in rapid succession (Ruth 1:3-5), and their deaths are never explained or investigated. Until now.

She is called "Ruth the Moabite" throughout the narrative, until she marries her husband's near kinsman Boaz and gives birth to the line of King David, proving herself to be "better than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15; quite a remarkable phrase in the almost unerringly patriarchal world of the Bible).

Why this constant emphasis on Ruth's foreignness? I would suggest that it's because her standing as a ger—a stranger,

an alien—is central to a dispute in the pages of the Bible about racial identity and belonging. While the Talmud can easily be understood as an ongoing discussion, we tend to think of the canonical books of the Bible as pretty well fixed and self-contained, so it can be surprising to realize that biblical books such as Ezra, Nehemiah and Ruth are in contention with each other, arguing over who gets to call themselves an Israelite and who doesn't.

Needless to say, this resonates with issues dividing the modern US. *From Sun to Sun* toggles between the perspectives of two women separated by 25 centuries, as their stories reveal the similarities between ancient Israel and the modern US. Both societies are largely made up of diverse "tribes" united not by a single ethnicity, but by an idea, enshrined in a set of sacred documents, meaning both societies have to continually grapple with the issue of who truly "belongs."

An ideal expressed in the Hebrew Bible is that we're all equal before God and under the law ("There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you," Ex. 12:49). The ideal of the secular US Constitution is largely the same, and yet we often fall short of these ideals (e.g., in the Torah, we are commanded 36 times not to hate the stranger, yet here we are, hating the stranger).

Starting out in ancient Babylon in 538 BCE, Ruth must join the exiles returning to Jerusalem to secure a future for herself and her grieving mother-in-law Naomi, by means of an interfaith marriage. They are accompanied by a free-thinking prophet who calls himself Ben-Isaiah, who believes that the God of Israel is the God of all humanity: Let everyone come and drink from the waters of Zion! The problem is the returning exiles also include religious leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, who cite the Torah as justification for "purifying" the land by expelling all the foreign women—like Ruth.

Whose vision will prevail?

The modern story features a hard-working smart-mouthed Latina investigator, Felicity Ortega Pérez. In preparation for the modern section of this novel, I spent several months working for a private investigator, conducting interviews in Spanish, collecting physical and video evidence, and doing basic forensic accounting. We also put on vinyl gloves and did some Dumpster diving, which was a nice change of pace, and which appears in the novel as well.

Kenneth Wishnia

New York

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# Discussion Questions

1. Kenneth Wishnia chose the title *From Sun to Sun* because it recalls the old saying, “Fathers work from sun to sun, mothers’ work is never done”; it also emphasizes the cyclical nature of women’s lives throughout history, and the parallels between the two protagonists, Ruth and Felicity, despite the 2,500 years separating their lived experiences. What associations do these concepts bring to mind, and do you have your own interpretation of the title’s meaning?
2. The Book of Ruth is the shortest narrative book in the Bible, and Wishnia made some pretty big changes to expand the story to a sweeping, broad-canvas epic of a novel. One of the biggest changes was moving the story from the time of the Judges (c. 1000 BCE) to 538 BCE—the end of the Babylonian Exile. What might be some of the reasons for doing this, and what do you think the story gains (or loses) from the shift?
3. The Bible treats the Babylonian Exile as an unqualified disaster: Solomon’s Temple is destroyed and the whole population of the Kingdom of Judea is exiled into captivity. Scholars say that the Babylonian practice was to exile the elites—the nobles, the military and religious leaders, and the wealthy merchants, all of whom would have strong reasons to stage a rebellion against the occupation of their land by a hostile power—while leaving the *am ha’aretzim*, the people of the land, in place, because subsistence farmers are unlikely to attempt a violent rebellion against heavily armed overlords. There is considerable evidence to support this view: to return to the example of the *Talmud* once again, the consensus in the field is that the Babylonian Talmud is superior to the Jerusalem Talmud, since there was a major rabbinic academy and Jewish population in Babylon one thousand years after the Israelites supposedly returned to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. What does this reframing of the Exile—the probability that a majority of “captive” Judeans elected to remain in Babylon—mean to you in terms of how Jews have adapted and survived so many disasters throughout history?
4. Ezra is considered a “second Moses” by traditionally observant Jews for his role in re-establishing the Torah as the law of the land, yet his explanation for the Babylonian Exile—that God turned his face from the Israelites because they married foreign women and went “whoring after” their gods, and that the men must divorce their wives and send them into exile, along with any children produced from such unions—has troublesome implications in today’s world. Biblical evidence strongly suggests that the Book of Ruth was included as a direct counter to the exclusionary racial policies of Ezra and Nehemiah, as if to say, “So all foreign women are evil? How about this foreign woman? She was pretty good.” What issues does this subject raise?
5. Contrary to Ezra and Nehemiah’s nationalistic perspectives, Isaiah is an internationalist who believes that the God of Israel is the God of all humanity. He even calls a foreign general, Cyrus of Persia, “the anointed one” (*ha-moshiakh*), for allowing the Israelites to return from Babylon to Jerusalem. Cyrus managed his empire better than most conquerors,

allowing the basic social, religious and institutional structures to remain intact in the lands he absorbed into his empire (today we would say he wasn't into "nation building"). It appears that these two distinct points of view are still very much present in both modern day Israel and the US, where even today we have tension between the "diversity and inclusion" people and the "America was founded as a white, Christian country" people. Discuss.

6. For the storm-in-the-desert scene (pp. 86-96), the source was a short, three-verse passage from Exodus (Ex. 4:24-26) that Wishnia expanded to a 10-page sequence to highlight the significance of the female power depicted in the source material, in the figure of Moses' Midianite wife, Zipporah. The passage is astonishing in a "How did this get in here?" way. Coming right after the famous burning bush scene, where Moses agrees to obey God's command to go back to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery, and the next scene in the exodus story, where God commands Aaron to meet Moses in the wilderness and make plans to confront Pharaoh and demand that he free their people, comes this unexplained threat, apparently deflected by Zipporah's mastery of pagan blood rituals, in the land of the Midianites:

At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered [Moses] and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched [Moses'] thighs with it, saying "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."

God sought to kill Moses? What on earth?

The only thing that makes sense to Wishnia is that this passage represents a tiny fragment of a much larger narrative that must have been part of Zipporah's story: they are on her turf, in Midianite territory, and a local demon—a desert dwelling spirit of some kind—comes to kill Moses. And she gets between them, a pretty gutsy act that hints at the power she must have possessed, and that when the

editors were putting together the final redaction of the Torah, somebody insisted that they put in a piece of Zipporah's story, so they settled on this tiny, tantalizing fragment. Something's been cut from our history... Something's missing... Thoughts?

7. Food! There is a famine in the Book of Ruth that sets the plot in motion, with a family moving from Bethlehem to the land of Moab, in what is now south-western Jordan. For dramatic purposes, Wishnia moved the famine from the beginning to much later in the story, in order to describe its devastating effects in far greater detail (often using imagery from other famines described elsewhere in the Bible), and to give more power to the scenes where Ruth—who is both a widow and a stranger, returns from gleaning with an apron full of grain. What do you think of the ways Wishnia used the famine?

8. In what ways are ancient Israel and the modern US similar?

The modern story raises such issues as:

9: What does it mean when people discover they have unknown Jewish heritage? Wishnia would argue this is a uniquely Jewish problem: modern Americans don't typically "discover" they have hidden Christian lineage. Why did so many Jews change their names to hide their ethnicity? To avoid antisemitic discrimination, of course, but shouldn't we view this as a troubling phenomenon in the 20th (and 21st) century US?

10: In terms of Latino-American history, this "troubling phenomenon" goes back more than five centuries, when Iberian conversos, or "crypto-Jews," came to the New World under a cloud of suspicion. What happens when our own history is hidden from us? This question is especially acute considering the importance of historical memory in Jewish rituals and practices.

# Map



Photo credit: Library of Congress

In the Bible, Ruth comes from the nearby land of Moab, just across the Jordan River. In *From Sun to Sun*, she comes from the steppes north of the Black Sea. If you have some Mizrahi Jewish ancestry, and you want to travel from the Iraq/Persia region to Eastern Europe, the shortest overland route runs between the Black and Caspian Seas.

# Arnold Böcklin's The Isle of the Dead



Photo credit: Martin P. Bühler.

Sergei Rachmaninoff composed a symphonic poem based on this painting, also called *The Isle of the Dead* (1908), which Wisnia blasted repeatedly while writing the storm-in-the-desert scene . Use this image to enhance your discussion on question number six.



# Kenneth Wishnia's Passover in the Ecuadorean Andes



Kenneth Wishnia with his wife, Mercedes Peña, near Loja: a typical view of Ecuador's southern Andes.

When my wife and I were first married, nearly 40 years ago, we lived in Cuenca, Ecuador, about 8,500 feet up in the Andes. I never encountered a hint of anti-Semitism from the locals, mainly because no one had ever met a Jew before and had no idea what one was. (The first time December 25 came around, I was asked, “How do Jews celebrate Christmas?” I was still pretty new to the language and culture, so I mumbled something about how we light candles and make special foods.)

One aspect of Ecuadorean culture that I really appreciate is that they didn't really talk about me as being related “by marriage.” My wife's cousins are my cousins, her aunts and uncles are my aunts and uncles, and it was nice to be become part of an enormous extended family, especially since my family of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews was decimated by two world wars and the rest of the twentieth century.

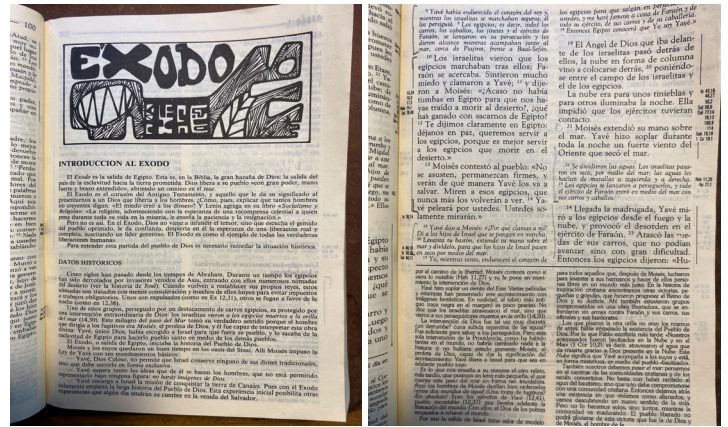
But then something happened when Passover rolled around high up in the Ecuadorean Andes, 3,000 miles from my own family back in New York: I simply

had to make a Seder. I mean, I had to. I didn't have access to a *Haggadah* (this was long before email, cell phones and the Internet), so I photocopied the relevant portions of Exodus from a Spanish Bible, cut and pasted them into a fairly coherent story, made my own *matzoh* and I invited some of my deeply religious Catholic relatives to come over and break bread – and I mean break. And you should have seen their faces when I demonstrated that the leader of the Seder is supposed to hold up an intact piece of matzoh, say a blessing over it and then break it in two and pass it around. I also read these lifelong devout Catholics the commandments related to celebrating Pesach on the 14th of Nisan. That sure raised some eyebrows. At least two of them had entered seminary at one time, and they had clearly never heard these commandments being read aloud. (cf. “on the fourteenth day of the month, there shall be a passover sacrifice to the Lord, and on the fifteenth day a festival. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days” Num. 28:16-17.)

They asked, weren't there special songs we sing at a Seder? so I taught them to say, *dayenu* (3 syllables),

explaining how condensed Hebrew is compared to the Spanish, hubiese sido suficiente (9 syllables). And I spoke the words of “Dayenu”- somehow I was able to do that, in Spanish, after being there for about 6 months—conjuring up the verses I could remember in the stanza-building style of the original.

It was truly a special ceremony, underscoring the common beliefs of our Bible-based religions, rather than our differences. I’ve discussed Jewish perspectives on the Bible with them many times since then, and I’m going back for more now that this new novel is out.



Two pages from the Bible Kenneth Wishnia used to create a patchwork Haggadah in Spanish for his “I have to make a seder” seder in Cuenca, Ecuador. (Note the pencil marks on the page containing Exodus 14:8-24, denoting which sections to copy.)

# Recipe: Yuca Frita

Recipe courtesy of Marian Blazes, from [The Spruce Eats](#)



Photo credit: Kenneth Wishnia

## Ingredients

2 Pound of yuca root

2 Cups of vegetable oil

Dash of Kosher Salt

## Directions

1. If using fresh yuca, peel the yuca root
2. Cut yuca into large pieces
3. Remove the inner core of the yuca
4. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook yuca until it starts to turn translucent and can be pierced easily with a fork. About 20-30 minutes
5. Drain the pot
6. Cut the yuca into rectangular wedges
7. Heat 2 inches of vegetable oil in a frying pan over medium heat
8. Fry the yuca in batches turning occasionally until golden brown
9. Remove yuca from pan and place on a plate lined with paper towels

10. Sprinkle the yuca fries with salt to taste

# Recipe: Bistec empanizado

Recipe courtesy of [Delish D'Lites](#)



Photo credit: Lazaro Cooks/[Flickr](#)

## Ingredients

1/4 cup of olive oil  
1/4 cup of sour orange juice  
2 tablespoons vinegar  
1 garlic clove minced  
1 teaspoon adobo seasoning  
1/4 teaspoon dried oregano  
1 1/2 pounds thinly sliced 1 sirloin steak  
1 cup all-purpose flour  
2 egg whites beaten  
1 cup unsalted or lightly salted soda crackers  
2 teaspoons garlic powder  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
Canola oil for frying

## Directions

1 Combine the olive oil, sour orange juice, 2 vinegar, garlic clove, adobo and oregano in a non-reactive container

2. Add the steak (it should be about a 1/4 inch thick; if not, use a meat mallet to pound it thin), then cover with plastic wrap and marinate for at least 4 hours, or up to 24 hours
3. Add the crackers, garlic powder and salt in a food processor and pulse until the crackers are completely pulverized. Pour the seasoned cracker crumbs onto a plate
4. Dredge the steaks in flour, then egg whites, then the seasoned cracker crumbs
5. Heat about 1/2 of canola oil in a frying pan to medium heat
6. Fry the bistec empanizado for 3-4 minutes per side, until golden brown and cooked through
7. Drain on a paper towel, and serve hot with white rice and Cuban black beans

# Recipe: Instant Pot Moros y Cristianos (Vegan + Gluten Free)

Recipe courtesy of Charla, from [That Girl Cooks Healthy](http://thatgirlcookshealthy.com)



Photo credit: [thatgirlcookshealthy.com](http://thatgirlcookshealthy.com)

## Ingredients

- 2 cups black beans dried
- 3 cups brown rice rinsed
- 4 cups water (see notes)
- 1 yellow bell pepper sliced and halved
- 1 onion chopped
- 4 garlic cloves minced
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 1 tablespoon oregano
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 bay leaves
- pink salt to taste
- 2 tablespoon olive oil coconut oil works too!

## Directions

1. Rinse the black beans in a colander to rid any debris and remove any broken beans or any impurities (if any)
2. After thoroughly rinsing off the black beans pour

the 4 cups of water onto the beans, cover and leave to soak overnight or for about 6 hours if you are pushed for time

3. Add the oil first followed by the onion, garlic and bell peppers (your sofrito) to the inner pot and select "saute". Saute until soft and translucent for a few minutes then select "cancel" so the vegetable cook on the residue heat

4. Add the seasoning - oregano, cumin, black pepper, bay leaves and combine with the vegetables

5. Pour in the black beans along with the water (if using canned beans add them now with the extra water to make it 4 cups in total)

6. Pour in the brown rice and stir so everything is evenly combined

7. Select "pressure cook" and choose "high" if the option isn't on default then adjust the +/- to 25 minutes

8. Place the lid on with the valve set to "sealing" it will take several minutes to reach pressure before starting to cook

9. Once the cooking process has finished, leave unit

to do a natural release (should take approximately 15 minutes)

10. Add the pink salt according to taste and serve.

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