



**A guide for group study & discussion of *A Wretched Man* Novel**

## **Part One, Tarsos 23 -- 33 CE**

- 1) Discuss the names of the characters (Aramaic or Greek but not English). Read Mark 6:3 and discuss.
- 2) What do you think of Paul as a young man? James?
- 3) What do you think of the novel's description of the brothers James and Jesus? "Like their father, the brothers boasted ample bellies on their pear shaped bodies, big men in girth but not in height."
- 4) The novel says that Eli the old Pharisee in Tarsos called his student Saul, but otherwise he is always Paulos in the novel. Read Acts 9:4, 9 and discuss.
- 5) Under what circumstances could Gentiles enter into the family of God, according to the prevailing Hebrew view?
- 6) Talk about Paul's guilt. Discuss the character named Jubilees.

## **Part Two, Damascus 34 -- 37 CE**

- 1) With Paul's trip to Damascus, the journey motif of the novel is introduced. Discuss a journey motif as a literary device.
- 2) Did the description of the journey help you to imagine yourself into the story? Have you ever taken a geographical trip that was also a spiritual journey?
- 3) How did the Pharisees respond to the claim that Jesus was the Mashiah? What did the Pharisees find offensive about certain elements of the Jesus movement (the Hellenists)? Discuss.
- 4) Compare the novel's account of Paul's Damascus road experience with the three accounts from Acts (Acts 9:3-20, 22:6-16, & 26:12-18) and Paul's own brief account at Gal 1:15-16. Think of the times in your life when you felt the presence of God. How would you describe the indescribable? Do you think your experience was similar to or different from Paul's experience?
- 5) Discuss the character named Charis.
- 6) Gal 1:17: "[After the Damascus experience] I went away at once to Arabia", which the novel interprets as Petra. Why do you think Paul went to Arabia? Why such a brief mention of this trip in the Bible?

### **Part Three, Jerusalem 37 CE**

1) Read Galatians 1:15-24 & 2:6. The core of this passage is the very brief report of Paul's fifteen day visit to Jerusalem where he stayed with Cephas (Peter) and met James ("the Lord's brother"). Imagine yourself as a mouse in the corner. Why do you think Paul went to Jerusalem? Why only fifteen days? Do you think it went well or poorly for him? Notice his comments that bracket the trip to Jerusalem: "I did not confer with any human being," and "those leaders contributed nothing to me." What inferences may be drawn from these Galatians comments?

2) Discuss the symbolism of the architectural design of the Temple.

3) The Pharisees and Sadducees are often lumped together, but the novel arranges the affiliations differently--Sadducees/Romans vs Pharisees/Nazarenes. Discuss.

4) Discuss the implications for James as the younger brother of Jesus and for Paul as one who never encountered Jesus during his lifetime.

### **Part Four, Tarsos revisited 37 -- 39 CE**

1) *Apart from Torah*. Discuss the implications of this phrase for the novel and Paul. See Romans 3:21, 28.

2) Sacrifice and atonement--two concepts of Hebrew religion that Paul grafted onto his interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Read the 16th chapter of Leviticus. Discuss.

3) Despite his Damascus transformation, Paul's attraction for Arsenios remained. Discuss.

### **Part Five, Antioch 39 -- 49 CE**

1) Find Antioch on a map. This was the largest and most cosmopolitan city of the entire region at the east end of the Great Sea. Discuss the lengthy interlude Paul spent in this important Greco-Roman city.

2) Read Psalms, chapter 2. For the ancient Hebrew writer of this Psalm, what did "anointed" refer to? "my son"?

3) Read Psalms 110:1. "The Lord (Hebrew *Yahweh*--Divine name) says to my lord (Hebrew *adown*--human master, owner, superintendant, or lord). Discuss.

4) What do you know about Roman emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius? Discuss the Edict of Claudius (pp 174-175).

5) The journey to Kypros (Cyprus) and then to Anatolia (Turkey) is often referred to as Paul's first missionary journey, but this overlooks his possible trip to Arabia and the years spent in mission at Tarsos and Antioch. In any case, the efforts of Barnabas and Paul were apparently quite successful. What factors likely contributed to their success?

6) Earlier, Paul had been exposed to the Mithras mystery cult. Tarsos was home to a major Greek university of the Stoic school of philosophy. In this part of the novel, he stumbles upon an Aphrodite orgy (pp 192-193). Discuss possible Greek influences on Paul.

7) The large gathering in Jerusalem is referred to as the "apostolic assembly" by church historians. Read Paul's version at Galatians 2:1-10 and the account in Acts at 15:1-30. How do they differ?

8) The fallout at Antioch is known by church historians as "the Antioch incident". Compare Acts 15:30-41 with Paul's account at Galatians 2:11-14. What is the nature of the disagreement in Acts? In Galatians? Why such a stark difference? Which version is more likely accurate?

### **Part Six, On the road 49 -- 56 CE**

1) Review the maps at the front of the book and consult other ancient maps. Trace Paul's route west, through the rugged Taurus mountain pass known as the "Cilician Gates", onto the cities of the region known as Phrygia, then north to the highland plains of Galatia, then west along the ancient Persian Royal Road bypassing Asia, a sea crossing to Macedonia, then down the Achaean mainland to Corinth, then returning to Ephesus of Asia via ship across the Aegean Sea. The novel suggests Paul and his entourage walked these thousands of miles although riding a donkey, horse, or even a camel would have been plausible. Discuss the nitty gritty of ancient travel-- where to find food and water, currency, danger of banditry, clothing, sleeping in tents, starting a campfire, etc. Note the strategic location of Ephesus at the center of a hub with spokes to his network of churches.

2) The scene at the end of chapter forty-nine depicts James and the Nazarenes struggling with doubt. Jesus' crucifixion and the heady optimism of the early days of his expected return seemed a distant memory. Jesus had not returned and the circumstances of the Hebrew people under the yoke of Roman oppression had worsened. Deaths occurred. In the next chapter, Paul also must consider the delayed return of Jesus and death among the followers. Discuss how the passage of time would have affected developing theological interpretation of Jesus.

3) Research the Acrocorinth, the local mountain that overlooked Corinth, and the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus. Discuss.

4) Chapter fifty-four seems to contradict the popular view that Paul was a misogynist. Consider the novel's words in the mouth of Timotheos: "Let the woman be silent with full submission ..." which Paul rejects. Compare 1st Timothy 2:11-12. Does the novel turn things around? Why would the novel's author deliberately have Paul reject words that tradition attributes to his first letter to Timothy? Hint: What if Paul didn't write all the letters that tradition ascribes to him?

5) How many different letters does Paul write to the Corinthians, according to the novel? Why not two, as the New Testament suggests? Hint: Ancient editors may have "cut and pasted" portions of multiple letters to compile the two that became part of the New Testament.

6) List the letters Paul wrote according to the novel. These are the seven letters that the scholarly consensus agrees were actually written by Paul. Three more (Colossians, Ephesians, and 2nd Thessalonians) are considered possibly authentic but not for sure. The remaining three that tradition ascribes to Paul (the pastorals: 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus) are believed to be "pseudepigrapha" (written in the name of another) according to the scholarly consensus. Discuss.

7) If Romans was the last letter Paul wrote, why does it appear first among his New Testament letters?

8) The section ends with the rebuke of Titos regarding his criticism of the slave. See Titus 2:9 and the comments at number 4 above. See Galatians 3:28 which the novel refers to several times as Paul's baptismal formula. This verse has been referred to as the Christian "Magna Charta". Does this verse represent the core of Pauline thinking about inclusivity and marginalized groups? Should all his writings be filtered through this lens?

### **Part Seven, Jerusalem Revisited 56 -- 59 CE**

1) Read the Lamentations quote at the beginning of this section. For centuries, the Hebrew people had lived under the yoke of foreign oppressors. Not only was this economic and political, but their cultural identity was in jeopardy. For many Jews, assimilation and the attraction of Hellenistic culture was more dangerous than the swords and spears of the Roman legions. Discuss the Nazarene attitude toward Torah and the threat posed by Paul's Gentile mission.

2) Skim Genesis 25:19 through chapter 35. The saga of Jacob in these ancient Torah texts is metaphor for Israel's origins and key to their cultural identity. Remember especially how Jacob stole his father's blessing, which should have been the birthright of his brother Esau. In light of Paul's dream at the beginning of chapter sixty-five, discuss "supersessionism", which is the claim of some that Christianity is the replacement, fulfillment, or completion of God's promise to the Israelites.

3) Consider the list of names Paul used at various times for his opponents **within** the Jesus movement (p. 364). Unduly harsh?

4) "Who do you say that I am?" This question on the lips of Jesus (Mark 8:29) echoes through the centuries from the first disciples, rings loudly in Nicea (Nicene creed 325 CE), and continues to sound today. Fully human? Fully divine? Both? Something in between? In the novel, Paul speaks for a trajectory toward the divine point of view while James argues that Jesus was his flesh and blood brother. The early Christian hymn (the subject of chapter sixty-five), which Paul included in his letter to the Philippians, marked an important waypoint in the debate. What do you think?

### **Part Eight, Rome 59 -- 62 CE**

1) Paul's letters contained no further autobiographical information after his sojourn in Corinth before heading to Jerusalem, and thus we are dependent solely on the book of Acts for further details. Acts takes Paul to Jerusalem and then to Rome but does not mention the death of Paul. The quotations from Revelation at the beginning of this section are believed to allude to Rome (Babylon, the great mother of whores) and Emperor Nero (the beast) and the martyrdom of Christians in Rome including Paul. About the same time as the book of Revelation was written (around 95 CE), the leader of the Church in Rome (Clement) wrote a letter that mentioned the martyrdom of Paul, and this is the best evidence we have that he was executed. Discuss.

2) Consider the origin of the term *in-carcer-ated*.

3) Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the novel's resolution of the Paul-Arsenius relationship? Read the notes at the end of the book regarding the question whether Paul was gay. What do you think? Were you offended by this theme of the novel?

4) Josephus, the contemporary Hebrew/Roman historian, wrote about the execution of James and suggested it resulted in much unrest in Jerusalem, led by the Pharisees, who successfully deposed the High Priest because of his illegal actions. Some historians suggest this was part of the spiraling chain of events that culminated in Jewish civil war just a few years later. Discuss the death scene of James.

5) Discuss the death scene of Paul. What was your emotional response to the novel's ending chapters?

6) Discuss the notes at the end of the book.