

Cathedral

Beta Playtest
Ron Edwards / Adept Press
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Mourning is a brokenness of the world as we receive it and as we construct it. Though we must somehow piece that world back together in order to continue living, it is never the same world we remember from earlier. Marc Ellis, Reading the Torah Out Loud

Fair warning

This is a Solitaire role-playing game. You play it by yourself. The actual play procedures don't amount to much more than sitting back and daydreaming, without being bothered. The stricter rules are more about framing devices and how they get modified across several phases.

Also, playing this is a science fiction and fantasy *project* for you, not a dalliance. It requires some solid creativity, and something of a writing assignment.

Earliest playtesting should be "for love," meaning, we aren't here to break the game. The plan is to discover whether the vision of the game and basics of play are actually as fun as we hope. I especially ask that this text be treated only as a design and playtesting draft, and not as a draft of the text to be published. Therefore it needs no writing critique.

Starting point

This is a science fiction and fantasy setting featuring a fictional religious institution, which you will invent mainly during play. You start with two imagined physical items. One is a **page** from the sacred texts, which is well-known and likely to be cited regarding various doctrinal points. The other is a **skull** said to be the relic of an important personage whose experiences, words, or actions are described on that page.

The text

This is what the page of doctrinal text says:

As Sh Meshta stood amazed, three faces spoke to him, and of Ah-Eh's words, only these could he thereafter recall: *Go among the river people and lie with the first maiden you encounter, nine nights and no further. The child she bears is your son and mine.* He made no protest and knew his way, lost no more.

The season of the rains came with thunder and force, such that many homes were destroyed and lives lost in the flooding, yet the harvest was rich and fair beyond all

memory. There in the fields Sh^hMeshta came upon the maiden Hhart, and he lay with her nine nights, but then nine nights again, and thereafter. The river people sheltered him and gave him a name in their tongue, Kom, and his son, Kom-Sk. Kom then built a little shrine, and day after day as he spoke there, the people came to listen.

Eh-Ah it is, whose blood is the river and who enriches the earth we harvest. Eh-Ah, whose laws rule nature and mankind alike. Venerate him not, but know his words and become them in the flesh:

***War is madness; be thou maddened in war.
Riches are false; spend them for truth in the glory of my name.
Life becomes death; die under the gaze of my son and his blessings.***

The people came to hear the words, to ask of him their meanings, and to build the shrine higher each year, and this was the first Temple.

Upon Kom-Sk's first year and naming, the river receded far beyond any time before, then returned with greater bounty again, and this did occur again with each further year he grew. When he became a man, he was sinewy and strong, his chest like twin shields. His hair gleamed with oil in his braids, and his weapons' metal shone like the sun when he laid hands upon them. All those neighboring lands sent their warriors sent to sack the Temple: the Mogites, the Abbalim, the red-painted Shaga – those who had laid waste to all lands and ruled them with fear. Kom-Sk defeated them, with madness, the glory of Eh-Ah, and death. All who knew him revered his glory and would follow his every wish. Yet he had not spoken in his life a single word.

Nine times nine years passed from the birth of Kom-Sk, and the shrine stood many times a man's height, with many roofs, and the spearmen to guard it drank of serpents' venom. None could withstand them in battle, nor could resist them across the villages as they stalked in the night. Hharta wore the three-faced mask and her rule spread far across the land.

And upon that day when the sky burned black and the river gave forth monsters, Hharta had Kom brought before her on the white plaza, and there as was the custom of the river people, his joints were broken with hammers, and his cries and mouthings were written and painted upon her skin in the sacred pigments.

Kom-Sk then spoke, such that all heard him: "*This is what it is.*"

At the outset of play, the text is easily recognizable as the product of an establishment church. The page is one of many in an easily carried, plain, mass-produced book. Its design is not very readable, as the print is dense and small to conserve space. It includes a large number of full-page illustrations, some of which are gory or racy, in which characters have upwardly-gazing, noble expressions. Its cover includes the holy symbol and a generic title like "The Sacred Book."

The skull

Choose whose skull it is supposed to be: any of the persons mentioned in the page of sacred text.

At the outset of play, the skull is quite old and is in bad shape. Only about two-thirds of the original bones are left, it might not hold together very well or is held together through applied materials, it bears bits or smears of leftover decoration such as gilding or paint, and it shows marks of fire or other damage from long ago.

Randomly determine the disposition of the skull relative to the church

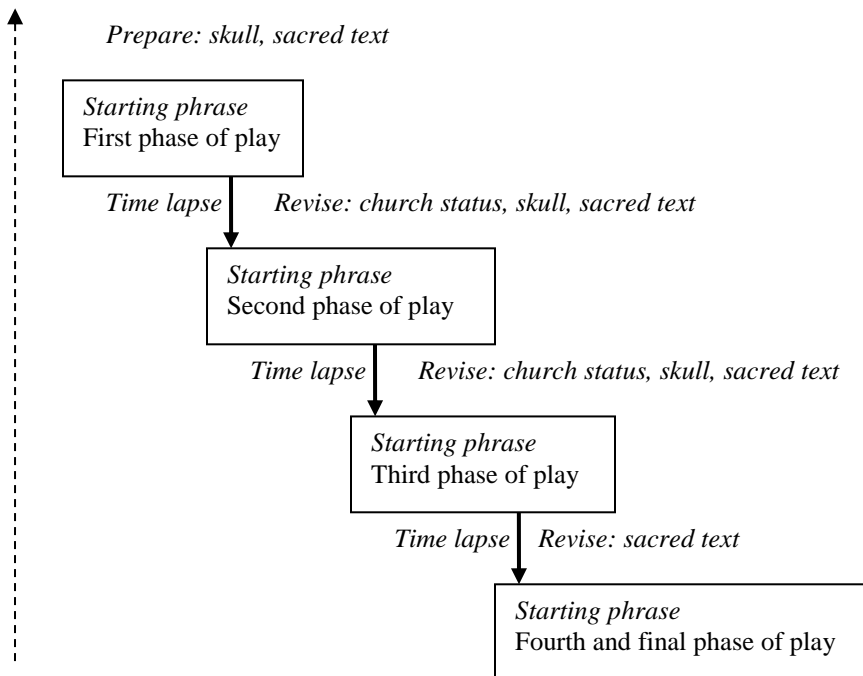
- 1-3: Displayed prominently and centrally
- 4: Kept under formal care with limited access
- 5: Kept secret and secure by a specific in-church group
- 6: Location unknown, but desperately sought

Cross your starting result off the list. This will be done two more times later in play.

The structure of play

It's played in four phases which move backward through time, in randomly-determined durations. Play proceeds from left to right, going further and further into the fictional past as indicated by the solid arrows, creating the setting's timeline incrementally as indicated by the dashed arrow.

The fictional present



The fictional past

When you're playing a given phase, the events precede things you already know in the fiction. You'll see more and more constraints on content given your knowledge of future events. Just how causal you'd like to be with that content is up to you.

Preparation

To prepare, you note the current status of the church in society and the current use and physical status of the skull in the church, using the provided lists. You read the current state of the page of doctrinal text.

Daydream play

Within each phase of play, beginning with a key provided phrase, you play by sitting quietly and turning your attention inward, to imagine characters in their situations. You do not need to speak or write anything, or to use any quantitative or physical devices. The setting may have as much science fiction and/or fantasy in it as you want. As far as imagery, action, characterization, moments of crisis, and consequences are concerned, it's all up to you, in the moment.

Without trying very hard, you'll be making up the religion as an *institution*. The events of play concern people who hold official positions in its hierarchy, at any level and in any capacity, and who live and work primarily, not necessarily exclusively, on church property. So when you get there, think visually and dramatically, in terms of architecture, formal hierarchy, clothing, and ritual, and not of the details of doctrine or belief.

The current status of the church is:

- Part of the establishment, meaning an ordinary part of society, integrated into politics, economics, education, but with no special authority over other centers of power. It is also probably not the only significant religious institution in society.

This status will be different in later phases of play. In later games, you may choose to use one of the categories listed later as the starting point, in which case substitute the establishment option for it in the random list.

Draw upon whatever imagery and terms are most associated with the general concept of such a church in your mind. It's not set in our real history and can be a little bit objectified and perhaps cartoon-ized. The technological status of the society at the start of play may be set by you at any level.

An obvious model is the Abrahamic tradition, but as I see it, nearly any major world religion and any number of historical ones can lend their concepts and images to this construct. Remember that it can begin, and even stay, *extremely* sketchy. You definitely don't have to make up the doctrine and beliefs, only the look and feel of the church itself. Oh! And don't start *doing* any of this right now – it's part of play, so don't prepare anything.

Phase 1

You've already read the starting page of doctrine, decided whose skull it's supposed to have been, and arrived randomly at the current status of the skull.

Play

Imagine people who are part of the church hierarchy and whose lives are conducted almost entirely on church property. Initiate the events with the phrase:

Two of these people are making love.

Then daydream! Conduct no written activity at all. In your daydream, continue the scene in your mind, learning more about who they are, what they do next, and anything you like about the

situation. Really get into the initial imagery, placing it in context of what the church is like at this time.

Shift to scenes and other characters as they occur to you. Just daydream along, when necessary bringing yourself to heel to make sure that you are imagining what someone does and what happens. Here's where you establish the atmospheric and cultural details, during play rather than beforehand. Don't concern yourself with names or other specifics, and don't feel constrained to stay with a given character. Not much might happen, or quite a lot.

Whatever the larger situation is, doctrinal application of that particular piece of holy text is relevant to it. Think about the other people in this situation; invent church bureaucracy, titles, ranks, and current priorities as you see fit. Eventually include the skull as it fits into this era of the church and its relevance to the personal issues at hand. The skull may or may not come into play in a dramatic fashion, but it should be in there.

Your daydreamed story may well include any of the following:

- A distinct act of justice or injustice
- An application of textual doctrine, or the decision not to do so
- The resolution of a pressing human crisis

As these or similar events proceed, be aware that your gold standard for the content arrives when any character finds unequivocal evidence that the contemporary text is not wholly original. It could be public or private, investigative or by accident, official or unofficial, or in whatever form you may come up with.

This Discovery is your signal to stop. Stop regardless of whether any of the other content has been resolved, or to put it differently, if such resolutions occur, keep going until you hit the Discovery.

I don't know how much time this will take. I suggest shorter rather than longer. Try not to be interrupted. This is unequivocally your own internal time.

The only thing you write down from playing a phase is the nature of the Discovery.

The sacred page

After play stops, compose the antecedent document to the text you used in this phrase. Rewrite its content with a substantive difference in *two or three* units of information, reflecting what was changed in the interim.

Revise it, or rather, un-revise it, according to your whim and interest at the moment. You can mess with gender or any other aspect of the identity of any character, actions and events (and who actually did them), named groups' names, the context of some explicit instruction, whether a narrated event is written as a lesson, the interjection or removal of magical content, and indeed the addition or removal of anything.

You can even call into question whose skull it's supposed to be, although this is a pretty big gun and should be used only once if at all.

Don't over-write this step. It works just as well if you do it nearly at random. Remember, change only two or three things, and that's it.

Phases 2-3

Arrive randomly at how many years this phase precedes the one just played by rolling 3d6. Choose the highest value as the 100s place and the other two as you please, for some value between 111 and 666. Once only, you may use 4d6 instead, using the lowest value for the 1000s place. Briefly consider technological and cultural differences.

Roll 1d6 at the current status of the church in society, using the following list:

- 1-2: Discriminated against, meaning an acknowledged part of society, but separate from and subordinated to its power structure. Members are protected by law, but also made visually identifiable and are subject to derogatory language. They may suffer blame during times of trouble.
- 3-4: At the height of societal power, meaning that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is also the governing body relative to other powerful groups such as military and educational organizations. Even basic economy is mediated through church ownership and policy.
- 5: Folded into another church, meaning that the religion is effectively a tolerated sect, recently absorbed into a more powerful organization which may have been antagonistic to it previously, or whose leaders found it useful to validate due to local worship.
- 6: In schism. The church has split into different organizations with differing titular authorities and interpretations of its texts. Membership in a side of the split matches with distinct economic and political aims in society, and religious language has been incorporated into the debates and violence associated with these distinctions.

Since you're playing backwards in time, consider these possibilities.

- If the schism comes up, then one of the sides is the one you've been playing all along so far, i.e., the one which will win the schism during the intervening years you just rolled.
- If the folded-into-another status comes up, then everything played so far was actually the secondary, larger church that engulfed it. This requires sort of a reboot, in that the church to be played from this point on *ends* in this current phase.
- If the height-of-power comes up, then you might toss in some foreshadowing regarding how you know, through what you've already played, how this power will be diminished in the future.

Fictionally, the older version of the sacred page is a different physical object. Having moved play earlier in your fictional history, the technology producing texts in any fashion prior to printing, may be less sophisticated.

- *Discriminated against:* The page is found in two kinds of document. One is a big, heavy thing, cheaply and crudely bound but carefully tended and repaired. It is used for services and only one exists for a given organizational center for the church. The other is a scattering of easily carried pamphlets for important sections of the text, with densely-crammed lettering, and the important phrases to memorize are set out in all capitals. A rather involved and specific title heads each pamphlet.
- *At the height of societal power:* The page is one of thousands in a gorgeously-produced, solidly-bound item that compiles all the holy texts and weighs at least seven pounds. Its expensive cover is embossed with the church's holy symbol, with no other titling or

- explanation of its contents. It is lightly but painstakingly ornamented with gold leaf as well, and the interior pages are as high quality as contemporary methods can make them.
- *Folded into another church:* The page is found in a secondary religious text, prepared similarly to a larger and more impressive primary text. The church's symbol is placed in a subordinate position to the primary religion's symbol, and the title is brightly visible on the cover, with some kind of orienting content like "The Books of So-and-so" to indicate its supplemental status.
 - *In schism:* The page is found in two different versions of the holy texts. One of them is a solidly-bound, well-produced item. Its durable cover is embossed with the church's holy symbol, with no titling or explanation of its contents. The other is a collection of pamphlets combined in a simpler, flexible binding, lettered more crudely, whose title is more detailed and provocative. Its first section defies the authority of the primary version of the church and claims that the included sacred texts have been mis-used. One of the documents, including the page, is identical in content to a given section of the official book, but given considerably different context by association with the other documents.

Arrive randomly at the disposition of the skull relative to the church, using the same list as before, excluding the option you used in Phase 1.

- Displayed prominently and centrally
- Kept under formal care with limited access
- Kept secret and secure by a specific in-church group
- Location unknown, but desperately sought

Describe the physical condition of the skull as at least a bit better than how it started.

Then, play exactly as before. Use the predecessor document, uncompromised by the Discovered changes, as the contemporary one for this phase. Use any of these initiating phrases.

- *Clerks or scribes argue a professional point*
- *A council of authorities meet to discuss a recent execution*
- *A young person's formal initiation into church membership*
- *A prisoner's release to his or her family*
- *A man and a woman stand at an unhallowed grave*

As you daydream each time, consider any and all details of the setting which reflect the difference in time period. Feel free to include material which obviously sets up for future features (i.e. just played), without pressure to do so.

Finish with Discovery as before, and revise the sacred text to produce the new, i.e., chronologically antecedent document.

In preparing for Phase 3, exclude the options you used in Phase 2 for the social status of the church, the disposition of the skull relative to the church, and the opening phrase. In this phase, the skull is still enflashed. To what degree, and its physical status, are up to you. Perhaps it is mummified, with or without concealing wrappings; or perhaps preserved in fluid, with its container either opaque or transparent, as you see fit.

Fourth and final phase

Arrive at the time difference as before, but use the 4d6 years option, if you haven't already.

- The church does not yet exist, and whatever does is not yet an institutional power.
- The person whose skull was featured in all the other phases of play is alive.
- Examine the latest text, i.e. earliest in the fictional chronology. It does not yet exist either. It will be written in reference to events played during this phase. It may be written during the events played, or at some point during the time interval you just rolled.

Daydream those events. Your initiating phrase is:

Whatever this person is doing.

This time, stop at the resolution of the immediate human drama; there is no Discovery.

Play is now finished.

If you desire, take all four versions of your sacred text and use whatever devices you want to produce them in a form reflecting their fictional identity. My own meager knowledge would lead me merely to use software options for backgrounds and fonts, but if you have actual binding and craft skills, feel free to make something impressive.

If you desire, talk to someone about the saga you've created and what it might mean to you.

Themes

Is this about exposure of religion as a fraud, i.e., debunking religious text as lies? It depends on what you want to do. The content of your chronologically-earlier phases is up to you, or rather, emerges out of creative priorities you're bringing to this. One person may produce such a story, in which the religious content of the text arose simply through a historical game of Telephone; another may produce a story in which the grim institution began from something quite pure and idealistic, taking different shape later through the course of history. A third may do the reverse to reveal the evolution of beauty and philosophy from humble beginnings.

Go wherever your imagination brings you regarding ethical content, or even supernatural content of your fictional religion. My example is only an example and should not serve as a thematic model, or as a didactic message for your own use of the rules.

As a related point, there's no need for you to strive toward maximum coherence in your final, chronologically earliest version of the text, either. All it has to be is something which in the final analysis can be seen to arise from the events of the final phase of play.

"Religion" deconstructed

The trouble with the term religion is that the word means too many things, and it's too easy to pretend they match up, or that any of them causes any of the others.

- Belief: one's personal experience and convictions and doubts about metaphysical matters; also called "religiosity."
- Observance: one's behavior and habits which can be seen by others and identified as associated with a religion.
- Doctrine: a set of social instructions and interpretations of texts.
- Institution: a societal organization, characterized as all such things are by economics, political connections and influences, educational practices, and an internal hierarchy.

- Religion (broadest sense): the list and history of diverse churches, sects, and cults, as well as the doctrines and conflicts of schisms and unifications.
- Society: the cultures, states, and empires which include and may incorporate the religion as policy and law.

These aren't synonymous, not yesterday, not today, not ever. Not even in a way.

Consider the confusions when discussing a *Christian person*, referring to belief or observance, and sometimes confounding the two. And then consider that such a person does not necessarily adhere to a specific *Christian doctrine* (of which there are many) or belong to a given *Christian church* (again, out of many). Furthermore, if they did either of these, at the institutional level, that would not dictate any given intensity of belief or observance, at the personal level. The blanket term *Christianity*, covering the history and diversity of many churches and sects, contains almost no reliable predictions about any instance of these things within it. Finally, *Christendom* encompasses the cultures, states, and empires which include, and in some cases incorporate as law, a historical association with Christianity.

Even the larger-scale terms do not necessarily enclose the smaller-scale ones. A Christian person does not necessarily live within Christendom. Conversely, not all the people who do are Christian in any way, nor are all the religious institutions in that culture part of Christianity.

This point critically applies in terms of cause. It's illogical to expect individual Christian beliefs to characterize the diplomatic or military actions of a nation's government in Christendom, or to point to the corruption or hypocrisy of a given Christian church as a way to devalue a given Christian person's beliefs. People are constantly elevating their own religious identity over others', by identifying positive features of one level of terms for one's own religion and contrasting them with negative features of a different level in theirs.

Some harsh words about sacred text

All religions claim direct connections to historical events and divine presence, as documented through texts. Not one such claim stands up to scholarly scrutiny.

Sure, some of the material is quite ancient. But what matters more is how such materials, as opposed to all the other materials being written at the time, were accumulated and associated with one another, especially since much of it was antagonistic at the time of writing.

For example, most of Exodus as found in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles is a mash-up of two distinct accounts, respectively written to support the competing religious and ruling establishments of Judea and Israel, one supporting Moses as the primary prophet and the other supporting Aaron. They were brought together centuries later, after one priesthood had absorbed the other.

Another example is found in the New Testament's combination of (i) the Christ martyrdom tradition, not specifying any particular person or means of death; (ii) the Jesus or "Q" tradition of Skeptical philosophy, not including death or martyrdom of any kind; and (iii) the political writings following the destruction of Judea concerning the crucifixion of rebels, not mentioning religion or mysticism.

Therefore how the texts were compiled and ordered is at least as important as the texts' individual content, some of which is obscured in the result. Furthermore, physically printing and distributing a book is yet another independent act, creating the impression of a unified source and guide.

Sacred texts are institutional items, compiled, organized, framed, and distributed according to the historically-local needs of specific groups. Therefore their content in pure prose form is often at odds with the book's actual use. A priesthood must re-interpret this content, even turning what was written as conflicting texts into didactic instruction despite making no sense as such. The purpose is to construct a meta-narrative which is only slightly supported by the points made in each section, and to create meta-characters which may override the words, actions, and themes illustrated by the characters in each section.

Write your own starting page

This is a lot of fun and makes the whole game more personal.

Compose a page of sacred text for the church which is consulted or referenced for doctrinal purposes, at a suggested length of 500 to 750 words. Its content should include some combination of events, pronouncements, characterization, instructions, and explanations, and you can go to town with evocative names. It may seem daunting to compose an important, sacred text of the church, unequivocally acknowledged at least partly as a direct transcription of the Word of God.

However, it doesn't have to make any particular sense. The best route is easy: never mind the plot or the point, and gleefully dump in any amount of some dramatic historical event, miraculous happenings, prophetic pronouncements, soap opera, and the odd screed on personal behavior. Add atrocities for padding. Arrange it into some kind of order, and you can always toss in a chapter or section shift if the subject changes too much.

The result will be partly incoherent, giving the impression that with bits have been left out or left open, but it will be at the very least intriguing and full of material to mine for the purposes of church doctrine. It is, after all, an ancient and composite *account* which has been used for centuries as *instruction* to contemporary readers, which creates a bit of cognitive dissonance, if not an outright headache, when you try to apply logic to it.

Go right ahead and use it for the rules as written. It will work fine.

Influences and references

Non-fiction

Richard Elliott Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Burton Mack's *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, and Alice K. Turner's *The History of Hell*; also, Hugh Schonfeld's *The Passover Plot* as an artifact in itself.

Fiction

Walter M. Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, Michael Moorcock's *Behold the Man*, and Graham Shelby's *The Knights of Dark Reknown* and *The Kings of Vain Intent*.

Comics

The Book of Genesis Illustrated by R. Crumb, which is very useful in tandem with Friedman's book, and Dean Motter and Ken Steacy's *The Sacred and the Profane*.

Film & TV

The God Who Wasn't There (2005) and *Agora* (2009), for serious content; and select episodes of *Father Ted* (1995-1998) for distinctly un-serious content which is nevertheless to the point.

Games

D. Vincent Baker's *In a Wicked Age* formalizes periodic epic adventures in colorfully-labeled historical moments, using key phrases, potentially created out of sequence. This design began as an IAWA hack. The *Fading Suns* supplement *Priests of the Celestial Sun* offers one of the most nuanced, historically-believable fictional churches in RPG texts. Ben Lehman's *Clover* is the first game in my experience to consider solo role-playing outside of the context of choose-your-own-adventure books. Gary Pratt's *Code of Unaris* presents the first system of word-substitution adapted to role-playing.

I was a little blocked on this design because I'd been thinking in traditional group terms. The Solitaire RPG Challenge (January 2011) was perfectly timed to allow me to throw away that assumption. I owe great thanks to Emily Care Boss and Epidiah Ravachol for organizing the contest and to the latter for his comments on the first draft of this work.

Music

The song "St. Stephen" by the Grateful Dead on their *Aoxomoxoa* album (1969); the original studio version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970); the song "Cathedral" by Crosby, Stills & Nash on their *CSN* album (1977); the *Lullabies From the Axis of Evil* album featuring various artists, produced by Harmony Ridge Music (2004); and the *Chant* album by the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos (1973/1994).

Example

For this example, I authored a new holy text page so as not to bias your use of the one in the rules. I can't stress enough, as well, that nothing about what I dreamed/played should influence your content.

Phase 1: the present

The sacred page is part of a people's history that composes most of the early texts of the church. It reads:

Under the rule of the wicked, ye know only jeering not laughter, only the spasm of exhaustion not the joy of release, and only the silencing of thy cries. They who increase batten upon the rest, and call it virtue. Whereas the true virtue is to destroy them whole and entire. Let the many-bodied ones descend herein and let the stones be touched thereby.

Shame upon them all, he said, and fire.

So spoke Yem-Obbas who had come to the gates as a starving dog, with gaunt ribs and hollow eye. So spoke he in the day and in the night came the toppling of the white stone. Broken was the stone. Na-hey, na-hey, the many-bodied, so they are called, and they call for fire and then for blood.

Zemas-Zann spoke then: how shall ye preserve what ye love by destroying it entire? Zann-Zemas spoke the same to her people: shall the womb be made barren? Each chose a white pebble and by the passing of these from hand to hand, the voices joined.

Whereby comes the rule of the rule of the wicked?
What rain bringeth that which is not water?
Where is the stone now it is broken?
Who is it that now shall be born?

Came then a woman of Zann-Zemas to the water, asking of Yem-Obbas, O dog, shalt thou drink? For thy tongue lolls dry, and thy are not long for life. Let this restore thee, let thine eyes fill and grow bright, let thy body live. What is then this water, said he to her. Do not offer that ye know not of. I do not thirst. Come away, said the people, come away from him, the hollow-eyed dog. But she said no, she would stay.

Blood then followed the fire, and long thereafter the dead were not less than the living. Of the heads become skulls on the stakes where they were set, they numbered one thousand and one. The woman asked upon the hillside, brothers, what is that noise? Come away, our sister, they replied, it is but the howling of a dog.

Zann-Zemas was said to die, but she did not. Na-hey, na-hey, the womb does not die. Of Zemas-Zann, only his words traveled with the white pebbles, which in this time numbered one thousand and one.

What's going on? Well, I have no idea, and that's part of the point. The order's obviously all messed up. Whenever I felt things were coming along clearly, I shifted gears and wrote something else. I tried to indicate that the original was being read by people who already knew the story (unlike me), and hence as written, is nearly uninterpretable by others. I stuck in the body count because ... um, because.

As per the rules, the current status of the church is:

- Part of the establishment, meaning an ordinary part of society, integrated into politics, economics, education, but with no special authority over other centers of power. It is also probably not the only significant religious institution in society.

And the page's appearance reflects that status:

- The page is one of many in an easily carried, plain, mass-produced book. Its design is not very readable, as the print is dense and small to conserve space. It includes a large number of full-page illustrations, some of which are gory or racy, in which characters have upwardly-gazing, noble expressions. Its cover includes the holy symbol and a generic title like "The Sacred Book."

The skull is said to be that of Zann-Zemas. It is currently beat-up and fragmented, with some parts missing and the remainder not holding together too well. It is currently desperately being sought by the church.

Opening phrase: Two people are making love.

I imagine a spaceport with vast, vaulted halls, more like an immense train station than an airport. There are not so many arrivals and departures that it's chaos, but there's room enough to handle several at a time, and the ships are huge, with many pods each. The technology involves steam somehow; upon a ship's arrival, associated with its final stopping state, there's immense hissing and clouds of the stuff everywhere, through which many neon or otherwise colorful, glowing light sources can be seen.

In one of the pods or cars, two people are making love quickly, as they must be finished and visibly unconcerned with one another by the time the doors open. They emerge among many others, through the dispersing steam, into waiting vehicles that whisk groups away on automatic tracks. Everyone is dressed in practical but just a little bit puritan clothing – no visible skin except for hands and face, the head covered by a smooth hood. One of the two people is a young man, who tries to catch the eye of the person he's been with, to no avail in the press of passengers.

The young man enters into a daily routine of studies, and it becomes clear that the spaceport was actually one unit within an even vaster citadel of mini-societies and functions, of which many are church-oriented. The imagery concerns the illustrations of many saints running along the wall just under the ceiling, all depicted in stylized or symbolic form – one of which differs from the rest in being only an ornate skull.

Deep in one of these sections, in clean but undeniably ancient rooms, are floor-level, coffin-sized baths in which people are submerged in fluid, then as it's drained, bathed in radiant light. Here the man encounters his previously-seen partner, now better seen to be recognizable as another young man. The partner urges that they meet secretly; the young man refuses to listen as he's worried for the other's safety. Evidently their relationship is extremely forbidden, and the society is cracking down hard on obscenity – millions of people are being exiled off-planet, and these youngsters' arrival here, and inclusion, is like winning the lottery of life.

About here I realized the primary aesthetic of this phase: everything is clean – scrubbed, disinfected, irradiated, swept. No reason why suggests itself. But when the young man is studying the very clean high-tech tomes in the library stacks, it's shocking when he's confronted by a semi-spectral, cadaverous, rags-wrapped being, filthy enough to drip dirt as it moves. Evidently this is highly unusual, but he knows what it is, one of the nearly-legendary keepers of the church knowledge, for whom the evident profanity of its uncleanness is considered sacred. The being points to the page – the specific page in question – which the student is studying.

I continued to imagine the separation of the lovers and the main character's determination to preserve the other's safety, as the latter was clearly more reckless. This came to an unwelcome conclusion for him, as he watched a line of exiles herded into their ships bound for who-knows-where – and saw his lover among them, unhooded, pushed along with the rest. He had voluntarily joined the exiles, no longer willing to live without his partner even in privilege.

When the main character returns to his dormitory-like dwelling-place, he discovers something terrifying laid upon his bed: an ancient book, nothing like the antiseptic cartridges in the library, but with real pages and smelling of all manner of materials as well as age. He turns to the page he'd been studying so hard and wondering about, to find it's different in this version:

Under the rule of the wicked, ye know only jeering not laughter, only the spasm of exhaustion not the joy of release, and only the silencing of thy cries. They who increase batten upon the rest, and call it virtue. Whereas the true virtue is to destroy them whole and entire. Let the many-bodied ones descend herein and let the stones be touched thereby.

Shame upon them all, he said, and fire.

So spoke Yem-Obbas who had come to the gates as a starving dog, with gaunt ribs and hollow eye. So spoke he in the day and in the night came the toppling of the white stone. Broken was the stone. Na-hey, na-hey, the many-bodied, so they are called, and they call for fire, **white and blinding**, and then for blood.

Zemas-Zann spoke then: how shall ye preserve what ye love by destroying it entire? Zann-Zemas spoke the same to her people: shall the womb be made barren? Each chose a white pebble and by the passing of these from hand to hand, the voices joined.

Whereby comes the rule of the rule of the wicked?

What rain bringeth that which is not water?

Where is the stone now it is broken?

Who is it that now shall be born?

Came then a woman of Zann-Zemas to the water, asking of Yem-Obbas, O dog, shalt thou drink? For thy tongue lolls dry, and thy are not long for life. Let this restore thee, let thine eyes fill and grow bright, let thy body live. What is then this water, said he to her. Do not offer that ye know not of. I do not thirst. Come away, said the people, come away from him, the hollow-eyed dog. But she said no, she would stay.

Blood then followed the fire, and long thereafter the dead were not less than the living. Of the heads become skulls on the stakes where they were set, they numbered one thousand and one. The woman asked upon the hillside, brothers, what is that noise? Come away, our sister, they replied, it is but the howling of a dog.

Zann-Zemas **died in the fire**. Na-hey, na-hey, the womb thus **was barren**. Of Zemas-Zann, only his words traveled with the white pebbles, which in this time numbered one thousand and one.

Phase 2

It's 612 years before the phase just played.

The church's status at this time is discriminated against, meaning an acknowledged part of society, but separate from and subordinated to its power structure. Members are protected by law, but also made visually identifiable and are subject to derogatory language. They may suffer blame during times of trouble.

The page is found in two kinds of document. One is a big, heavy thing, cheaply and crudely bound but carefully tended and repaired. It is used for services and only one exists for a given organizational center for the church. The other is a scattering of easily carried pamphlets for important sections of the text, with densely-crammed lettering, and the important phrases to memorize are set out in all capitals. A rather involved and specific title heads each pamphlet.

The skull is kept under formal care, with limited access. It's in much better condition: all the parts are together, the glue is holding nicely, the paint or whatever is still in mere traces. It still shows damage, and it's pretty clear that someone tried to smash it.

Opening phrase: A prisoner's release to his or her family.

My opening scene of the prisoner's release was directly connected to the previous phase of play, in that the "cell" entailed being kept in suspension in those same coffin-like depressions – obviously they'd been completely repurposed in the intervening centuries, so here, I imagined them as the highest of high-tech.

Two concepts set in fast: that although this was still industrial and urban, it's long before, centuries before, the spaceflight depicted in the previously-played phase; and that stark violence was always lurking near.

The family that came to receive the released prisoner wore strange hoods that covered their upper faces with superhero-like eyeholes and left their lower faces bare, and with long lower portions that turned into folds hanging down the chest and back. They brought one for the prisoner, as well as a religious pamphlet which he immediately tucked away with gratitude, and when they went to public transit to go home, they had to ride in a specially-designated car of the train. I also contrasted them sharply with the guys who worked the mechanisms to deactivate the cell, in their jumpsuits and utilitarian crew-cuts, and with the official who oversaw the event, in a uniform but with similar hair.

The man who'd been released, his family, and their friends conducted a religious ritual to welcome him home; it had to be done in their private dwelling because they have no churches. Over the next weeks, he works a steady job that's singularly boring, industrial, and disconnected from whatever the final product might be, along with many other people. It's apparently one of the few ways people of his faith can be employed. On the job, though, a lot of people eye him carefully and they are very evasive when he tries to talk with them about what he's missed while in prison.

He confronts his family – what's going on? – and discovers he's become quite a symbol, inspiring to those who feel militant and an object of fear for those who'd prefer to stay safe. I then imagined a rapid montage of how he acts upon the first, organizing militants, encouraging readings of the sacred texts which they interpret as bringing ruin to the oppressors.

I then imagined the cityscape at night, when a prominent building erupts in a pure-white explosion, followed by an uprising full of pistol fire. In hand-to-hand combat, the insurgents favor an odd hammer, probably a common tool, with a nasty ball-peen business end.

Then, after the initial furor, a second explosion goes off. This is the true strike, as a focused and determined squad penetrates the cracked-open government building, gets into its archives, and liberates the relic sacred to their faith, heretofore only accessible through government permission. It is, of course, the skull of Zann-Zemas, implying the beginning of the ascension of the faith into a more powerful component of society as seen in the prior phase of play. Along with it comes a bunch of accumulated and associated material, including very old, primitively-bound sacred books. The main character of this phase flips to the section including the page he'd relied on for directing this action, to discover it's not quite as he's used to seeing:

Under the rule of the wicked, ye know only jeering not laughter, only the spasm of exhaustion not the joy of release, and only the silencing of thy cries. They who increase batten upon the rest, and call it virtue. Whereas the true virtue is to destroy them whole and entire. Let the many-bodied ones descend herein and let the stones be touched thereby.
Shame upon them all, he said, and fire.
So spoke Yem-Obbas who had come to the gates as a starving dog, with gaunt ribs and hollow eye. So spoke he in the day and in the night came the toppling of the white stone. Broken was the stone. Na-hey, na-hey, the many-bodied, so they are called, and they call for fire, **white and blinding**, and then for blood, **not only the blood of the wicked**.

Zemas-Zann spoke then: how shall ye preserve what ye love by destroying it entire? Zann-Zemas spoke the same to her people: shall the womb be made barren? Each chose a white pebble and by the passing of these from hand to hand, the voices joined.

Whereby comes the rule of the rule of the wicked?

What rain bringeth that which is not water?

Where is the stone now it is broken?

Who is it that now shall be born?

Came then a woman of Zann-Zemas to the water, asking of Yem-Obbas, O dog, shalt thou drink? For thy tongue lolls dry, and thy are not long for life. Let this restore thee, let thine eyes fill and grow bright, let thy body live. What is then this water, said he to her. Do not offer that ye know not of. I do not thirst. Come away, said the people, come away from him, the hollow-eyed dog. But she said no, she would stay.

Blood then followed the fire, and long thereafter the dead were not less than the living. Of the heads become skulls on the stakes where they were set, they numbered one thousand and one. The woman asked upon the hillside, brothers, what is that noise? Come away, our sister, they replied, it is but the howling of a dog.

Zann-Zemas **died in the fire**. Na-hey, na-hey, the womb thus **was barren**. Of Zemas-Zann, **they said** his words traveled with the white pebbles, which in this time numbered one thousand and one. **Yet not one of those words were his.**

Phase 3

It's 442 years before the phase just played, which is to say, 1,054 years before the start of play.

Church status: at the height of societal power, meaning that the ecclesiastical hierarchy is also the governing body relative to other powerful groups such as military and educational organizations. Even the basic economy is mediated through church ownership and policy.

Page's appearance: The page is one of thousands in a gorgeously-produced, solidly-bound item that compiles all the holy texts and weighs at least seven pounds. Its expensive cover is embossed with the church's holy symbol, with no other titling or explanation of its contents. It is lightly but painstakingly ornamented with gold leaf as well, and the interior pages are as high quality as contemporary methods can make them.

The skull is displayed prominently and centrally by the church. The tissue on it is mummified and wrapped, and the scalp still has long black hair.

Opening phrase: A council of authorities meet to discuss a recent execution.

This is a lot of time – over a millennium prior to the start. I began with a close-up image on the skull, so arcane or absent in the prior phases, but now a sight everyone in the culture is intimately familiar with. It's displayed in a grand niche dominating the entrance of an incredible building, with many, many roofs, levels, decks, and semi-open galleries.

I went all-out upon expanding the scope of my vision to a completely different landscape, still urban but without combustion or other radiant power sources. It's beautiful, full of elaborate architecture across a wooded landscape and a harbor of many bays, with grand bridges. The latter

see much traffic, such as attractive tiered wagons drawn by beasts with long slender necks, and the smaller carts drawn by two-headed donkey-like creatures.

My panoramic view settled upon an immense, broad structure, not ornate like the church at all, and went inside to see a strange design: circular galleries layered higher and higher, thus smaller and smaller, each filled with ceremonially garbed people engaged in intense discussion. It's a soviet – the biggest level passes on its conclusion to the next one up, and so on, such that the topmost tier will reach the policy decision. The lowest, thus biggest level has at least five hundred people in it, each representing every province across the land.

At the top tier are only four people seated around a small table, at the time of their unavoidable decision about what to do. Apparently the action and words of the executed person are gaining favorable interpretation in terms of the scriptures which represent the ultimate principles of this society, their constitution if you will. One woman in the group says what the others won't: that yes, the execution was unjust, but it must be presented to the public and to history as if it were. Basically, they must ignore the principles of the scriptures and move forward for the good of society, lest doubt be cast upon their political system. That means literally overriding all customs of the verified records of the army of scribes, a sacred topic in its own right. She is not happy about it but is tired of everyone else at the table trying to say it without saying it outright. She's a big, middle-aged woman, with a lot of weight to her and a thick neck, projecting weary strength, her grey hair spiky due to the long and tiring talks.

My imagination cuts away to see some of the dark side of this apparently highly civilized society. The people who record and codify the decisions at each level are slaves, chained to their writing desks, their work carefully scrutinized and disciplined. I also see the site of the execution: a woman's body still held upright by the spear-like bolt, shot from some kind of small ballista, that impaled her and pierced the wall behind her. Guards ring the site, tacitly threatening people to move along.

The woman at the high council turns out to be my focal character. I try to get a better understanding of her, to imagine her in the ordinary routines of life, but it fuzzes out a lot. I imagine a person who's often with her, at home and otherwise. A lover? Male or female? But I can't imagine a face, or any of their dialogue.

I stop trying and relax a little, to focus on the insight that she can't live easily with the decision she forced on the council, and therefore on society, and indeed onto history itself. As years and years go by, she pulls every imaginable rank to get access to the documents and to the holy text so thoroughly invoked for the history. Eventually, bent with age, she arrives at the execution site. It's not noted as important by anyone any more, just another street corner, with a plaque marking the historical event. The plaque is of course the official line she herself had implemented, a blatant lie.

She conducts a personal rite of contrition, not much more than merely speaking aloud to the memory of the executed woman – it's an apology. She carries with her the ancient documents she's finally managed to get, to read aloud the relevant passages from the oldest source she can get and trust not to be compromised. These are some pretty old documents – not books at all, but a collection of scrolls pre-dating their compilation into a single volume. In them, the original page in question is revealed to be:

Under the rule of the wicked, ye know only jeering not laughter, only the spasm of exhaustion not the joy of release, and only the silencing of thy cries. They who increase batten upon the rest, and call it virtue. Whereas the true virtue is to destroy them whole and entire. Let the **ArElla** descend herein and let the stones be touched thereby.

Shame upon them all, he said, and fire.

So spoke Yem-Obbas who had come to the gates as a starving dog, with gaunt ribs and hollow eye. So spoke he in the day and in the night came the toppling of the white stone. Broken was the stone. Na-hey, na-hey, the **ArElla, star-farers in their splended crafts**, and they call for fire, **white and blinding**, and then for blood, **not only the blood of the wicked**.

Zemas-Zann spoke then: how shall ye preserve what ye love by destroying it entire? Zann-Zemas spoke the same to her people: shall the womb be made barren? Each chose a white pebble and by the passing of these from hand to hand, the voices joined.

Whereby comes the rule of the rule of the wicked?

What rain bringeth that which is not water?

Where is the stone now it is broken?

Who is it that now shall be born?

Came then a woman of Zann-Zemas to the water, asking of Yem-Obbas, O dog, shalt thou drink? For thy tongue lolls dry, and thy are not long for life. Let this restore thee, let thine eyes fill and grow bright, let thy body live. What is then this water, said he to her. Do not offer that ye know not of. I do not thirst. Come away, said the people, come away from him, the hollow-eyed dog. But she said no, she would stay.

Blood then followed the fire, and long thereafter the dead were not less than the living. Of the heads become skulls on the stakes where they were set, they numbered one thousand and one. The woman asked **before they were herded into the ships**, brothers, what is that noise? Come away, our sister, they replied, it is but the howling of a dog.

Zann-Zemas **died in the fire**. Na-hey, na-hey, the womb thus **was barren**. Of Zemas-Zann, **they said** his words traveled with the white pebbles, which in this time numbered one thousand and one. **Yet not one of those words were his**.

Fourth and final phase

It's 1,455 years before the phase just played, which is to say, 2,509 years prior to the start of play.

The church does not yet exist, the sacred text does not yet exist in any form, and Zann-Zemas is alive.

Opening phrase: Whatever Zann-Zemas is doing.

This is a huge time-jump, allowing for almost complete freedom concerning the content relative to the future depicted in the previous phases of play. I also had the jarring new content of aliens and spacecraft of the past as well as knowledge of the space-faring future. This led a lot of the initial content to proceed in jumps and free-association of imagery to see how it felt, including some false starts.

After a few minutes, I settled upon an Earth such as few of us could dream of – a worldwide sustainable ecology and economy. I thought of city designs I'd read about maximizing fuel and travel efficiency, of blending energy collection seamlessly with the usage of materials, no "greening" necessary because that's how it's done from the ground up. All those material things we think of as causing political strife – solved.

Yet the current elections are full of such strife, as the incumbent – essentially the prime minister of the planet – is challenged by a populist whose constituency claims the distribution of resources is far from fair. I call the woman Zann-Zemas and the man running against her is Zemas-Zann, but I don't know if those are their names or titles for those roles in an election.

Zann-Zemas is a cunning, no-holds-barred candidate. I imagine Zemas-Zann contending with a number his claims which seem too outlandish to credit, ranging from accounts of famine and drought of which she has no knowledge or evidence, to claims of extraterrestrials arriving and interfering with earthly doings. I imagine her publically stating very rationally that only verified, scientific concerns may be addressed, calling for a return to intellectual rigor and the avoidance of rumor. It makes a lot of sense, and I sympathize with her frustration at being attacked by what amount to insinuations and flat-out unverifiable assertions ... until it also becomes clear that she does not in fact know what is really happening, and whether the ostensible ecological utopia was real or just propaganda which the elites believed to be true.

Then the aliens turn out to be real, and both candidates meet for the first contact with them. It's in a darkened chamber – I don't know where. The aliens are tall, willowy humanoids with thoroughly inhuman, elongated faces and magnificent branching head-crests that frame their entire bodies. The talks seem to go well and both candidates try to adjust to this new reality.

However, the discontented populace adopts the aliens as a goal to achieve power. They organize around a rumored prophet, whose symbol of a ragged dog becomes repeated worldwide, ultimately becoming a revolution which does contact the aliens directly.

The election is never held after all, pre-empted by the aliens' strike upon the Earth – a cataclysm of fire, destroying the ecology and nearly all of the water. It's uninhabitable. Zann-Zemas dies even as she tries to rally the populace into some form of order and possible reconstruction.

Oddly, I dream nothing of the prophet directly; he's never seen. I do imagine a woman, just before being herded onto the aliens' ships for imprisonment and exile, going to where many thousands of human heads rot upon stakes in the baking sun, and getting one of them. Whose is it? She doesn't know. But on the ship, huddled among the people, she tells stories of what happened, and says the skull is Zann-Zemas'.

Thoughts

It's important not to write or compose, to stop yourself when you realize that's happening, and to concentrate on feeling it. Details flit in and out, in a constant state of flux, so focus on one when you're looking for somewhere to go. In phase 1, I had no idea that the grotty hooded-and-wrapped being was going to show up; it was a completely free association.

The skull was entirely absent from my imaginings in this phase except for a brief glance at the church's interior decoration. Apparently the church was desperately seeking it, but that didn't play into the story at all. That's fine, and in retrospect, I realize that this story was destined to end with the skull being lost for good, thematically consistent with the notion that the church had become fully bland and subordinated to the establishment of the time.

Phase 2 hit a groove. Something about scaling the history back to a pre-spaceflight age similar to our own, with a few SF touches for foreshadowing, made imagining it very easy, almost headlong. The personal touch of the main character's psychology didn't seem to me to need much clarifying, and whenever I thought about other characters coming into things, they faded out fast and I was swept along anyway into all the explosions.

The dice rolls for phase 3 threw me a curve – I'd started with the church as a significant but not dominant part of the establishment, and evidently it had grown into that from an earlier period during which it was distinctly discriminated against. And, now, before that, it's a monolithic, policy-making, ruling-class entity? That's quite an up-and-down history going on here. That's what led me to go pretty hard for a significantly different past society for this phase, positing that the industrial revolution took place afterwards.

It's perfectly all right not to connect the phases too strongly. In this case, I never explained how the church went from this ultra-powerful, society-defining entity into discriminated status in the prior-played phase. One might think about the impact of the obvious industrial revolution during the intervening centuries, but that's not explained or addressed in the fiction.

In my earlier play sessions, I always finished with a pastoral Mediterranean-type setting similar to historical Biblical times. Some of those revealed very mundane but heartfelt dramas, and some of them yielded spectacular sword-and-sorcery, but all of them involved goats and hillsides and olive trees, with people wearing kirtles. Given the time jump – more than all the previous phases combined – I could easily have done that again. However, this time, the initial science fiction spin really opened up the possibilities for novel beginnings of the story in the next phase. The danger also immediately became clear: the temptation to compose and write and justify. I had to stop myself from analytical world-building several times in order to stay with the dream-first method to discover what happens.

I was a bit surprised at where the general story went: for example, my sequential edits had nothing to do with the thing I initially found most interesting, namely the prophet and his puzzling identity as a dog. Instead, I was moved to scrub out all sign of hope, turning the document into a bleak downer. Turning the many-bodied ones into aliens came extremely late in the process, much as it may look like "revealed at last" and thus secretly present all along.

Only after writing the above summaries did I realize the symmetry of the first phase's ending, in which the heartbroken young man is exiled by spaceship among a horde of other helpless and desperate people, with the final revision of the text, which concludes its narrative of the ancient events with a similar scene.