

Ophite

(working title)

Alpha game idea
By Ron Edwards / Adept Press
December 2010



One can live magnificently in this world if one knows how to work and how to love ... Leo Tolstoy, in a letter to Valerya Aresenyev, 1856

To my surprise, I have produced a game, or possibility of a game, concerning Gnostic lore. I always swore I wouldn't. So, if it works at all, Ken Hite is officially granted the last laugh.

Warning/intro

I'm aiming at short-form play, in which ending the session at the right moment is both voluntary and part of the point. It's the role-playing equivalent of mini-comics just a few panels or pages long and variably linked together as longer stories only when and if it seems viable at the time.

Earliest playtesting should be "for love," meaning, to discover whether the vision of the game and basics of play are actually as fun as we hope. I especially ask that we merely play and save discussion for later, and also that this text be treated only as a playtesting draft and not subjected to writing critique.

Vision & sources

It's about a group of friends and acquaintances living their lives, including one young person with an unusual, secret religion. Play is *sort of* about coming of age in a particular location and subculture of your choice, with no outstanding crisis beyond the rigors of life and circumstances.

What it's *really* aiming at is a creative atmosphere of comfortable riffing, off the mechanics and off one another. The general activity is shooting the shit, without regard to focused conflict, to give rise to reflection or provocative dialogue. The goal is to discover "moments," making snippets rather than episodes, almost more of a skit technique than a story technique.

Genre and structure: a certain stripe of comics

Consider independent semi-autobiographical comics, especially *Dykes to Watch Out For*, *Alec: The King Canute Crowd*, *Wendel*, *Beg the Question*, *Hate*, and *Box Office Poison*. They're naturalistic soap opera, typically urban hip, with the characters varying in age but usually mid-twenties, with a nominal protagonist but also an extensive ensemble cast. Consider the strengths of the genre ...

1. Slice-of-life homeliness, the engagement with day to day routine. Considerable panel and page space are devoted to what this person or these people habitually do. Nothing is too personal or too minor to

depict. The effect may at first seem trivial or even pointless, but over time, the characters' lives are illumined and grounded, and above all intimately compared with the reader's.

2. Creative room to breathe. You write and draw what you want, with no rules of any other medium. There's depth when you want, whether introspective, social, or illuminating the past; changes in the characters' lives when you want; and focus on whichever character you want, adding or abandoning them without explanation. And when you don't, there's no rush or need to impose change and drama.

3. The joy of timing. The stories or strips ultimately focus on critical or illuminating dialogue, but as an emergent property rather than as planned gags. This is the art of the naturalistic punchline. It happens rarely, but when it does, look out. The overall effect combines a thoroughly enjoyable sense of improv with – sometimes – a solid mastery of short-term storyline.

4. Utter thematic freedom. The genre respects no boundaries, deconstructing, leveling, lampooning, humanizing, and exposing vagaries of alternative and mainstream alike, especially the author's own chosen identity politics. Sex and nudity are the more subversive for being matter of fact and incidental.

5. Ongoing, absolutely freewheeling surrealism, flights of fancy, and messing with the medium.

- Time is nothing but silly putty. Storylines hop into the past and future without warning; time speeds by in decades in two pages or slows to a few seconds for twenty pages.
- Art styles shift by subject, ranging from crazy expressionism to dot-by-dot photorealism, or God knows what, all grounded in the friendly cartoonism of most of the work.
- Bizarre events and imagery break bounds between the depicted fiction and the content of a character's mind.
- Fourth wall techniques abound, as the characters speak to the reader, criticize and occasionally revolt against the author, respond to interviews from some omniscient source, and generally violate all rules of ordinary fiction.

These stories are created using aggressively underground comic strip thinking, for which every new installment is its own thing, written in and for the now. If, in the long run, this turns out to be a bigger story or even a graphic novel, then fine, but that wasn't the driving aesthetic of most of its production. The rules of the game aim to foster and draw upon this creative state, seeking new ground for the role-playing medium.

Content and theme: religious observance

Religion operates as a creative touchpoint for the game. However, the topic is not belief but observance. Observance is about habits, routines, and modes of expression, with little or no reference to spiritual or metaphysical content. It's a framework for dealing with stuff day to day and a touchpoint for ritual, and socially, it's a touchpoint for self-image, for assertive commentary, and for making decisions. Any of which may well remain even if one breaks from the institution, the beliefs in question, or both.

This concept is applied in the game both non-fictionally and fictionally. The non-fiction side concerns the creation of all but one of the characters, drawing upon the backgrounds of the actual people at the table: religious upbringing, community, identity, and confirmation through ritual. These characters therefore become semi-autobiographical, without being literal depictions of real people.

The fictional side concerns a single character, called the Ophian, who observes a religion based on certain Gnostic principles. These principles hold that God as commonly talked about is an incompetent, sadistic impostor, and the world we live in is his flawed, deceptive creation. The specific Ophian or Ophite heresy focuses on the personality, efforts, and symbology of the being who fought on our behalf to bring

knowledge (Gnosis) to the first humans, in defiance of the false deity who sought to keep us utterly subordinated through ignorance. In other words, the serpent (Ophis) of Eden.

What does it mean to observe a religion with pedestrian moral content, yet considered abominable? How do you live? What do you say to people and how is your religion any kind of community? And how, although your practices are secret, does your observance respond to and affect your close friends?

Look and feel: the social group

I don't know if your experiences match mine, but a couple of times in my life, I was part of a strange little circle of friends. We were not co-workers. We were not fellow enthusiasts of a specific activity or if so, only part of the time, or not all of us. It wasn't exactly clear just what we were. Mainly we sort of ended up seeing one another a lot. It was a clique, perhaps, but an odd one in that the group itself provided no foundation for identity or labeling. It might exist in or among some defined subculture, but not necessarily defined *by* it. Everyone had reason to consider himself or herself "the outsider."

The social dynamic was unique. It was like ... you could talk as you pleased. From your thinking self, or straight from your ass, or just to vent, or channeling something you wanted to be associated with. You could raise something really important to you and be heard. Open candor ruled, and I do mean open – no taboos, and for some reason, complete trust. You could give someone the most frightful shit but frequently received same; you could merely breeze along, being there without anything on your mind, but infrequently, a topic got picked up and beaten with a stick. In retrospect, most of the chatter was unbelievable trivia and nonsense, and yet on occasion it really wasn't.

And one more thing. Sooner or later, it ended. You move away. You get a job you were really trying to get. You drift out of the group. You find a new hobby. You graduate. You get a romantic partner or more definitely, a spouse. The whole thing becomes a phase, an episode of maturation, which seems kind of a bummer considering that for a while, this was you and it was your life. Most especially, that weird, open, rambling yet highly personal dialogue that sparked and sputtered along ... it's gone. No job, no relationship, no family, no nothing seems to replace it.

The rules draw upon this social scene for both its technique and its subject. The players ramble about how the characters are rambling, in the curious freedom and intimacy found only in that context.

Preparing for play

Make the Ophian character

One person is the Ophian player, and his or her character is partly provided here in the rules. This character may or may not be the central person in the story to be created; that's left up to the events and decisions of later play. He or she might end up being merely a fixed riff-off point for everyone else, and some other character might be the "main" one.

The Ophian character's most important fixed feature is religion: he or she is an observant member of a secretive faith. The Ophian player should read the description of the faith in some detail, and anyone else can if they feel like it, but they don't have to. However, the character is not an expert on the faith or even educated in its details. He or she was brought up in it and ritually confirmed in it, and today he or she practices its details as an ordinary routine, but as a feature of family, extended family, and the family's community, not as a seeker or out of a particular religious drive. He or she knows the creed and the code as delivered to people at his level, but not the theology past the basics. He or she would be just as thrown off by a Religious Studies class as anyone with typical observant upbringing.

The fixed details about the Ophian character are as follows: twenty years old, slender, ethnically white Levantine, with local family either working-class or lower middle-class, needs a haircut, bright, personable, a bit aloof, works part-time.

The Ophian player passes out the following pairs of terms to the players, one by one, including to himself or herself, going around again as needed: male/female, virgin/not, lives with family/in apartment, single/paired-up, school full-time/part-time. Each person secretly circles which term will apply.

Example: The Ophian player takes the gender terms and passes out the rest. Everyone chooses and the portrait emerges: male, not virgin, lives with family, single, school full-time

Then the Ophian player rounds it out with name, job, ambition. Note that the name must be biblical, but distinctly consistent with the modern Ophian religion: Seth, Mary or Maria, Adam, Eve, Sophia, Leah, Lilith, Christian/Christina, Christopher, possibly Cain; but definitely not Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Paul, nor or any of the Apostles' names except for John, and certainly not any angel names of any kind.

The Ophian player says the Ophian character's name is John. He works part-time at a restaurant, and his ambition is to go into civil rights law. He's probably the first person in his family to seek a university degree let alone further advanced study.

The social context should be fairly well set with this information – what kind of youth or young working person subculture is involved. If it's not clear, then the Ophian player decides.

The struggles of entry-professional artists and the gay scene have been done very thoroughly so unless you think you can bring something new into it, I suggest not emulating those. Some ideas drawn from my own life at that time include restaurant work, pre-professional theater scene, early college obviously, academic research (which might be a little rarefied or elitist to fit the genre), and much cross-U.S. travel on no budget.

The Ophian player clarifies the context to be folks involved in progressive activism, probably a bit confounded by its dysfunctions.

Make the other characters

The other characters are constructed from two components.

First, each person except the Ophian player writes a brief viewpoint on religion that he or she genuinely held at some younger phase in their lives. It must be a younger version of you when you had strong views on or habits of your religious upbringing. List what religion it was (yes, the actual one), how you verbalized it, what it was specifically, what you wanted to get from talking about it, and what you wanted others to do about it or how to see you.

Example: Unitarian, big on constructed, experiential, eclectic spirituality, with overt social and political goals. Only a little Jesus, no God, universalism, some Tarot, some sweat-lodges, some beatnik poetry, some fantasy and science fiction. Totally opposed to any kind of societal institutional religion. Wants lots of recognition for being so open-minded and seeks attention from hip women.

Second, each person, Ophian player included, writes down a personal descriptor, a social consensus view, and a social connection on separate slips of paper. Feel free to use the following or to invent similar items.

- Personal descriptors: how they look and feel

- Lanky, goofy, hot, terminally hip, the mullet, from money, hyper-intellectual, artist above all else, motor-mouth, don't mess with this one
- Social consensus: how they relate to the others in this group, how they "riff"
 - but he's our pain in the ass, high-maintenance, scary fun, the moral compass, go-to for the know-how, everyone's pal, better not to ask, nicest person ever, reality check, moon unit, old guy, fish out of water
- Social connection: an identifiable historical reason for them to be involved (there may be none)
 - roommate, old pal from back in the day, fellow struggler in ambition, fellow lackey at work, romantic partner, ex-romantic partner, fellow hobbyist, fellow student in specific subject, distant relation

Pick them without discussion; it's all right if there's some duplication, as that simply means that more than one person is interested in the same thing.

All the papers go into a mix, and then each person except the Ophian player picks two things out of it at random. If a term is duplicated across characters, that's fine, but if you draw two duplicates, toss one back and draw again.

Armed with the Ophian player's description of the immediate subculture or shared activity, the religious statement you wrote, and the two slips, arrive at an idea for your character.

If you want, you can reverse one of your personal descriptor draws. If you have one or more social connections, decide whom it or they are with; if you don't, then don't sweat it, the person is merely "around" and accepted as such.

Determine his or her age either based on the subculture or common activity, or set it within a year or two of the Ophian character's age, which is 20. Come up with a name.

*Example: I have drawn **terminally hip** and **go-to for the know-how**. It seems to me that the first doesn't mesh well with the religious statement's painful idealism, so I reverse it to **terminally un-hip**. All right, my guy seems to be the group nerd, but with a big heart. I keep it easy and make him 20 like the Ophian character. I decide his name is Ryan but he prefers to be called Crow.*

Keep the undrawn cards around for later use with new characters.

Set up the deck

Give the Ophian card to the Ophian player. The rest of the deck is set up and managed face up. The "faces" are the text like Moving Day or Sex. The backs have the game logo, except for seven of them which have an angel image instead.

First, pull out all the angel cards and mix the other cards as a group. From the latter, pull out six cards without looking and set them aside. Mix the angels in with the rest, then set this out as a face-up stack, and put the other six cards face-up on top. All of which is a fancy way to say, "No angels in the top six cards." Also, keep the card box around for cards that get removed from play.

There will be quadrants in four positions around the deck for cards to be placed, so leave room for that. Players will also be accumulating cards; they don't have to organize or display them in any way, so those are probably merely little piles. Scrabble counter-holders would serve well, actually.

As a summary and reference, there are 40 cards, including a single Ophian card rated at 13 points, so the deck begins with 39 cards.

6 Mornings 3 points **	3 At School 1 point *	2 Petty Theft 8 points
3 Drink / Drugs 1 point *	2 Family 3 points	2 Losing the Big It 5 points
3 Sex 5 points *	2 Moving Day 2 points	2 Public Transport 2 points
3 Money 1 point *	2 An Outing 2 points	2 Movie/TV 2 points
3 At Work 1 point *	2 Cooking 2 points	2 Crazy Person 8 points

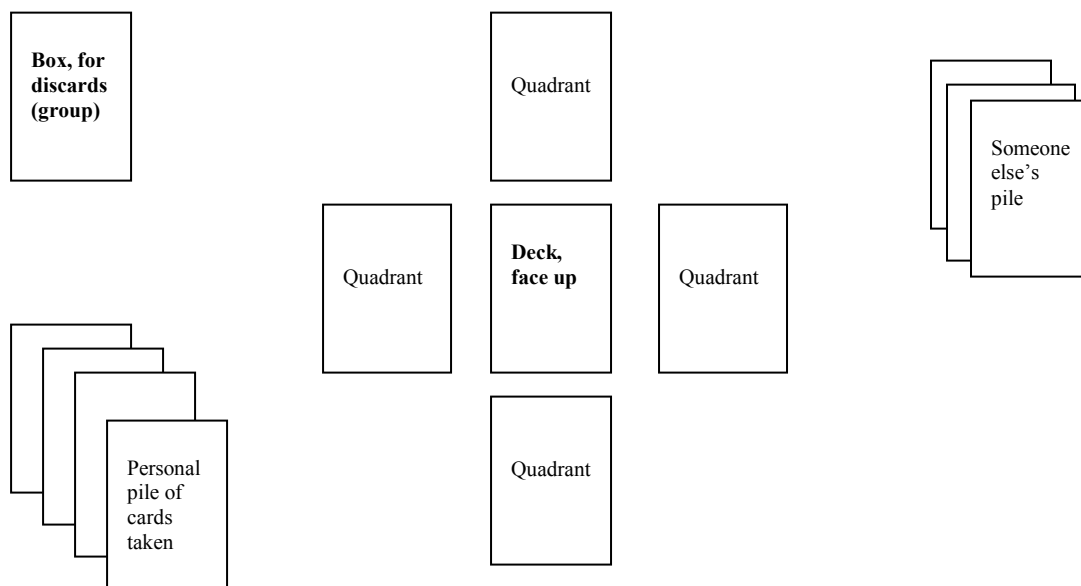
* Angels are on the backs of seven cards: Michael, Suriel, Raphael, Gabriel, Barachiel, Samiel, Uriel.

Rules of play

The Ophian player starts play by setting a particular location and immediately-obvious circumstances for the Ophian character, including any other players' characters if the player wants. The only fictional constraint is that the time be in the morning. Under no circumstances, now or at any later point, should a player state what a scene *will* be about, or what will happen in it.

Play dialogue should be conducted as a conversation in which the speakers remember to keep their primary attention on the imagined material at that fictional moment. Spoken input is unconstructed. People simply speak and listen as they see fit, and as long as no one fails to listen, there is no need to organize, prioritize, or take turns regarding who talks. Do not wrangle over *whether* something happens or is said; instead, listen and incorporate what you've heard, in this way acknowledging that you've heard it.

Card use is similarly unconstructed. Anyone may use them at any time, which is done by moving the card at the top of the deck to any of the quadrants. If a card is present there, then it is moved to the personal collection of that player.



Two special cards alter the process slightly. When a card is about to go into someone's collection, see if an Angel is revealed. If so, then card drawing ceases until it is resolved. A Morning card clears the quadrants and the cards in them go to the collections of the players who put them there.

Angel cards are discarded to the box when resolved. Cards are spent from personal collections during Angel resolution, and they are discarded to the box as well.

Content

Spoken input may vary widely across speaking in a character's voice, describing what they do, describing entrances and exits, introducing or playing other characters' actions and reactions in the situation, calling attention to any detail of interest, modifying or riffing off what someone else just said, or merely providing personal "reaction shots" at the purely player-level.

The default content is simple naturalism, depicting how these characters do things such as eating breakfast, going to work, hanging out, and anything else, and similarly, depicting anything and everything you know about the locale in kind of picto-documentary. Work with what you know, bring in what you think, enjoy conveying what you see with your eyes into the sphere of shared imagination. Keeping it normal is usually enough, especially since the normal may itself be quite strange.

People can add their characters to the action if they want at any time, or introduce and play incidental characters, or simply chime in with descriptions or even merely with personal reactions. The point is to promote character dialogue. Use the cards, develop things, but overall, talk! The talking can be bullshit, heartfelt, resolving, glossing over something, analyzing, advising, or anything.

When in doubt, take the piss, especially about the subculture or social endeavor in question – reveal its kooky values or internal contradictions, or showcase something definitely weird. As associated conversation, ask one another questions to prompt characters' internal dialogue and reflection.

Fictional time does move along, at least on the average. Have them do stuff as they talk, based on the situation, in an unhurried way as the physical and visual backdrop of the ongoing conversation, including passages during which no one goes anywhere because the spoken content just became too interesting.

However, "scenes" are a soft concept in this game. Characters may change location, time may jump ahead, and film-style cuts in attention to characters may occur during the course of any particular speaker's input. Morning cards are the only exception, as they mandate wrapping the current activity and moving into a specific time.

Card content: loose use!

Anyone can draw at any time, bumping the current top card to an open quadrant to reveal the one beneath. If the quadrants are full, then drawing a new card bumps the current top card to any quadrant card's position of the drawer's choice, and the card there is removed from the table, then flipped over to see if it's an Angel. If it's not then it goes into the possession of that player.

Therefore after a few turns, there are five face-up cards, the top card of the deck and the four surrounding it. Any or all of them may be drawn upon for content as anyone sees fit.

- One or more characters are literally in that situation
- Talking about that situation, whether as an anecdote, as a plan or consideration, or as a topic of debate, for which the dialogue may be internal or external

You don't have to incorporate a given card into the fiction, and it's possible for one to be revealed, to be bumped to the quadrant, and then bumped out of play without ever having been used. But they are often inspiring and helpful, when you want. The only exceptions, when card content is required, apply only to the Ophian player and occur at the start of play and with each Morning card.

Be easy with story transitions, character movement into new locations, minor attention-cuts; these are under no fixed authority and don't have to correspond to card draws or any other mechanics.

Development and motion

Don't introduce adversity. Characters may disagree, insult one another, and even lose their tempers without lasting social crisis; the default view among this group of friends is that everything eventually blows over. Angel cards will come along every so often to cause trouble, so nothing else has to do that.

Don't invent back-story either. If it's unknown whether two characters have slept together, then introduce some uncertainty about that if you want, but overall, pay more attention to what is being said now and how it's reacted to now. Especially avoid the temptation to throw fellow players a hot-potato such as "And my character's your cousin!" or similar. Again, the Angel cards allow more opportunity for such content, in a more specific and useful context.

Rounding out your character should be fun. You don't need to stay with the initial intensity or stridency of the religion description. Settle into the character's views as you "see" them interact with others. You can enjoy them as currently established or develop new relationships. Find their best selves occasionally as well as their faults, see them become tempered or brittle, think of the person as a maturing being and see where they go.

You may introduce new characters into the group, either literally in the sense of a new acquaintance, or in the sense that they've been around already but merely not appeared before. In this case, draw one or two cards to help your initial concept. It is not required to write a religion statement for new characters but you may if you like. You may now play either or both of your characters at any time you like. As a courtesy, permit at least one other player to make a new character before you make another one.

Flights of fancy

In the midst of all this naturalism and realistic rambling dialogue, you're also free to do whatever you want! Daydream or muse in the mind of your character, think visually, and then go bonkers. Do a bit where everyone is his or her own least favorite animal. Have a character idly watch an Apache cavalry charge down the train tracks going the opposite direction. Listen to the author bitch about the characters not cooperating and quit. Flash back to the characters' first birthdays and interview their parents.

The keys are to do it when it strikes you, to keep it short, to enjoy the freakiness and whatever insights arise, and then to move on, or back, to the ordinary events of the situation.

Special cards: Mornings

When a Morning card is revealed, all cards in the quadrants are removed and each goes into the possession of the player who put it there. If those cards include one or more Angels, then breathe a collective sigh of relief, as that angel's influence on the story has been negated.

The Ophian player skips forward in time to one or more mornings later and resets play similarly to the opening scene, a location of his or her choice, with whatever characters he or she wants. However, in the absence of any cards' content to draw upon, initial play must be non-adverse, fully "restful." That stipulation remains until someone draws a card and bumps the Morning off the top of the deck to a quadrant. Once in a quadrant, a Morning provides no content.

Special cards: Angels

When a card is bumped from a quadrant and flipped to reveal an Angel, then the fiction gets a bit scary. Bluntly, look at any character through the crosshairs. Death makes itself known to them, and to the participants in play, as intimations of mortality. *How* this occurs varies greatly:

- Literally their life may be in danger, under a wide variety of circumstances, in the present scene or a parallel one
- A relative or similarly close person dies, leading to any sort of fallout, e.g., psychological or in terms of family dynamics or both
- Someone dies in the character's presence, whether someone known to them or not

Use the specific Angel for nuances of the situation, and be sure to make the details as personal for yourself as possible, in terms of either sympathizing or not sympathizing with the character.

Lead the crisis for the character a little bit, i.e., not dropping them right into it. Therefore a relative's death might begin with a phone call informing the character about it, because the crisis is more about the consequences, but a murderous assault or suicide attempt might begin only with disturbing circumstances and work up to the genuine confrontation through play.

Why to do it, and to whom, requires a little brutality. Look at a given character's world-view or current habits, and deliver a harsh reality check tuned specifically for them. Especially in terms of the specific angel, whether it seems "just right" for that character in either a positive or negative sense. If you can see it or feel that for any of the characters at that moment, then do it. If you can't, then don't force it.

All card drawing ceases until the Angel is resolved. The five visible cards may be used for content as usual. If the top card is a Morning, ignore it throughout the angel resolution and move into its play requirements afterwards.

Whether as someone who's just narrated such circumstances, or as someone who's just heard someone do it, be sure to acknowledge when you think a given character is in the cross-hairs. Once so acknowledged, by anyone, it's now established.

When and if the Ophian character is involved in the situation, he or she interprets (or perceives if you like) the presence of the angel, hearing its wings beating ... not the air, but the medium of reality. This is a confirmatory moment of religious observance, which is not necessarily to introduce metaphysical or supernatural content, but rather showing the way that this character processes this issue.

Angel play is a golden opportunity for surrealistic content if anyone wants, as well as any mode of presenting information that inspires distinct imagery. Personally, I envision a comic illustrated primarily in the style of Alison Bechdel or Jason Lutes, now shifting into a vastly more textured and impressionistic style, as David Chelsea did with his sex scenes.

The group should develop the situations, allowing characters to be introduced and to interact, leading to more depth or playing through new locations. New back-story is welcome here as well; these are the scenes in which family backgrounds or psychological nuances, among other things, receive full attention.

An angel card is resolved numerically. Its score is either the top card's number or the sum of the numbers of the quadrant cards, whichever is higher. The range is 4-32, with a strong tendency toward 10 or so. (Playtest question: give the angels values in order, from +7 down to +1, if they're beaten too easily as written; currently though, at the outset angels are minimally at 5 whereas players are minimally at 1.)

During the ongoing dialogue of this part of play, every player may spend any of their collected cards to give points to threatened characters. You can distribute up to all of your cards to any or all characters. The Ophian player is a bit special; in addition spending collected cards, he or she has 13 points to spend in this fashion, which get used up during a given session.

There's no rush to assigning the points, do so whenever you feel sympathetic to a given character and think he or she could use a break from the current pressures. You can't assign points to your own character.

When everyone's done this, or declined, it's time to see how many points each at-risk character has received. Of those characters acknowledged to be under pressure, if they have enough points to meet or exceed the angel's value, then that character's owner describes how they cope. If they don't, then anyone except that character's owner describes how they fail to cope. Consequences can be as severe or as minor as seems logical from the character's circumstances, with the only stipulation being that the Ophian character cannot be killed.

After the various narrations are done, remove the angel card from play and continue, drawing at will as usual. Cards spent are also removed from play.

Characters keep their points for later angel scenes, with cards spent later adding to their totals.

Understanding the transitions

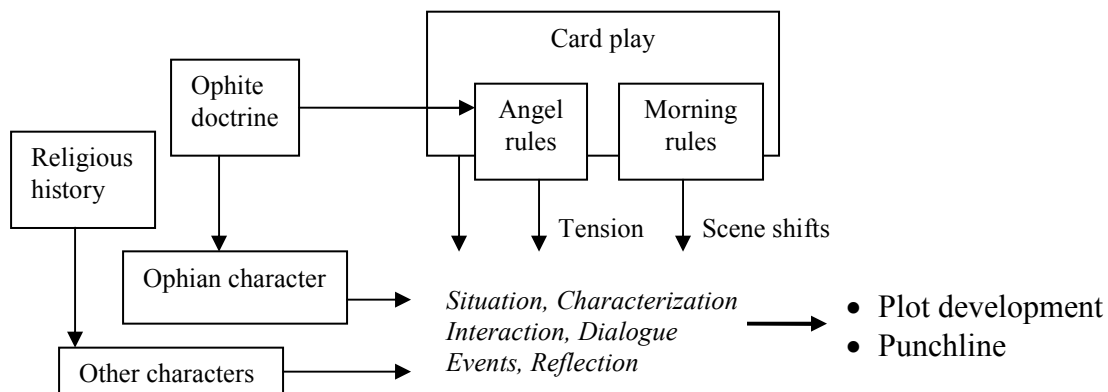
Here are all the ways the fiction and card play can change, over and above the conversational topics among the characters. The key point is that all of them are independent from one another.

- Minor shifts in location, time, and attention are applied when and if anyone says they do, without negotiation or revision, and with no required coordination with card play or content.
- A formal and specific shift in time and probably location is mandated by Morning cards, which also clear the quadrants; those cards are collected by whoever put them there.
- Angel cards initiate a fictional subroutine and introduce specific required content, but the quadrants aren't cleared and there's no requirement to alter the locations or time frame of current fictional events. In practice, there may be a tendency to see minor shifts as described above.
- Scenes are closed upon the appearance of satisfying emergent content,; these effects may be significant enough to close the overall session.

Endings

In the ordinary course of play, the fiction is full of characterization, interaction, and especially dialogue. Ongoing emergent features include reaction shots, juxtapositions, and possibly insights. A certain degree of enjoyable reflection should be present most of the time.

Two more distinct outcomes may appear: plot developments and punchlines. Forcing either one creates an artificial and unsatisfying effect. Instead, everyone has to be attentive to notice when they have emerged.



These outcomes very strongly suggest that the current scene come to an abrupt end, or to “wrap.” A wrap

means, simply stop playing. It's conducted by one person saying, "Wrap!" and if someone else confirms it. The current fiction therefore ends directly on the illustrated development in action or at the end of the spoken punchline. If on the other hand no one confirms, usually expressed by "Not yet," or "Wait, wait, one more thing," then play continues.

This may seem extreme, especially if the session hadn't been going on for very long, but it's better to end the session upon a good moment than to grind your way through to the end of the deck. It is also worth considering ending play entirely at any wrapped moment. As conceived, play isn't supposed to finish out a deck. It's hard to imagine making it through all 39 cards including seven angels without hitting a satisfying endpoint in the terms described above.

About Gnostics and Ophites

The literature on this topic is completely crazy. There's the institutional history, which is to say, official church writings on heresy; there's a bunch of scholarship which typically represents cultural triumphalism with only a few exceptions; there's a whole obfuscation of occultists from the mid-19th century to the present (I have just invented the collective for "occultist"), including their New Age and internet spawn; and all manner of pop culture ranging from anime-bot toys to comics to the most pretentious death metal to what appears to be at least some brand of gnosticized idealism in Hollywood.

Here's my quick and dirty summary. First, it's good to understand that what we call the Gospels were one particular snowflake in a veritable blizzard of narratives kicking around the eastern Mediterranean for a couple of centuries. A bezzillion different groups found one way or another to organize ideas from Judaic sources, current political upheavals, various Hellenic cults and philosophical writings, and a rapidly-coalescing but ill-defined fictional personage named Jesus. Second, and related, things shook out to shape the roots of modern Judaism and Christianity, and later Islam, due to Roman politics we need not go into here. Third, those three religions, comprising the Abrahamic tradition, represent a resounding defeat dealt to a body of alternate notions lumped together as "Gnostic." That victory arrived in part by absorbing a lot of gnostic detail and story-bits, such that the victor is probably best understood as a politically effective blend of various competing narratives.

OK, all that said, the common concept used to group the diverse Gnostics out of the victorious narrative, is that Yahweh, Elohi, Jehovah, et cetera, God in English and Allah in Arabic, is a fake. Or more accurately, a mid-level impostor who's only considered divine because down here we are mortal and small and under his thumb. The details take about a hundred different forms depending on which sect, century, and location one is talking about, but one of the most famous versions goes like this.

Creation: "Oops!"

The seriously major Creator of All, "God" for real, is called Bythos (depth, profundity), and is pretty boring – no personality, so total as to be utterly abstract, although gendered as male and called the First Man. For whatever reason, he is accompanied by Ennoia (thought, or Sige, silence), called Son of Man or the Second Man, and confusingly sometimes gendered as female. There's also the Pnuma, the First Woman, or Sophia (wisdom), and usually considered female, but called Barbelo in later sects, and perhaps hermaphroditic. All reside in the Pleroma realm, or Wholeness. They have a big threesome, no lie, and produce twins. (I'm not sure if it's porn when the agents are all so abstract, but the language is pretty uncompromising. Gnostic gods do in fact fuck.)

The one twin is perfect, called Christos, is considered to be incorruptible light, and is male. The other twin is named Sophia, also Prunikos (concupiscence, i.e. lust), and Achamoth (lower), Sophia Achamoth to distinguish her from her mother. She is imperfect and female. Sophia Achamoth is the most interesting one of the bunch. She tumbles into Matter (which exists along with water, darkness, and the abyss) and

conducts a “false creation” which you and I would call Creation because we’re part of it. Thus the Material realm is formed, kind of a second-class reality far removed from the Pleroma. Sophia Achamoth struggles to get out of this sticky mess she’s made, but only partly succeeds, creating a “middle realm.”

The real damage is done, though. While stuck in the material, she engendered an offspring, Ialdabaoth (son of chaos), who is the villain of the piece, being ignorantly convinced that he is the real and only God, the creator of all, and unreasonably obsessed with being praised for it. Gnostics call him the Demiurge. Some sects called him Ptahil and grouped him with two others in a trinity; others placed him as Iao, first among seven sequentially-created archons or angels, of which the first four make the composite called Yahweh or Elohi in the Abrahamic tradition. There’s another set of archons as well, which are either alternate names for these or a second, subordinate set, with the familiar names of Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, et cetera. They are associated with various animals like the lion, the eagle, and so on.

The heroic snake

So much for the origin of the cosmos and the false cosmos. The next step takes us back to Sophia Achamoth, who is unhappy with how things have turned out, and works against Ialdabaoth in the material world. Specifically, when he (badly) creates humans, she recovers some of his ill-acquired divine essence to ensure that Adam has a connection to the higher/real divinities and isn’t just another mucky abomination. Eve’s origins are a little murky, as some sects villainize her as a direct agent of Ialdabaoth and others pose her as a heroine whom Ialdabaoth tries to rape. Enraged at the couple’s awareness of the real God above him, he then shuts them up in a garden prison.

So the Garden of Eden story is reversed: it’s about Sophia Achamoth’s agent, Ophis (the serpent), who does the couple a good turn and helps them break free of bondage they’re kept in, by making them aware of Good and Evil, as opposed to unthinking obedience. Humanity is now freed to worship based on *gnosis* (direct knowledge) of the high God, but all three suffer for it because Ialdabaoth is a bad loser; the serpent becomes a creeping thing and the couple are condemned to die.

The forbidden fruit episode is a hero tale in which the serpent plays a Promethean role, and a lot of the gnostic sects revered the snake as a primary figure of worship in fashions similar or identical to Hellenic and Egyptian traditions. Hence the term “Naassene” meaning snake-follower, and the translation from that into “Ophite” or “Ophian.” (The whole satanic connection was very far in the future; the snake character isn’t identified with any other character in the texts in Gnostic constructions. Arguably the books in question hadn’t even been combined into a tome yet.)

A certain confusion shows up here, because according to some of the sects, there are two snake characters, the other one being Ophiomorphus, a sneaky and corrupting agent of the demiurge. Which one was created first, or whether they blended together, or whether the good one was perverted into becoming the bad one, and which one did exactly what, varies widely across sects in a mess of competing narratives. The same goes for serpent imagery associated with the demiurge and Michael.

The demiurge continues his petty and vicious ways toward the first family and early humanity. Cain is presented as getting a raw deal, as he takes the rap for murder without being himself responsible for death. Seth, the third son, is especially in tune with Sophia Achamoth’s influence and is revered as the ancestor of humanity. Hence “Cainite” and “Sethite” are common labels in addition to “Ophite.”

Jesus and/or Christ

As time goes by, Sophia Achamoth makes another bid to correct or rein in her unruly accidental creation, going so high as to appeal to Pneuma, who enlists the permission of Bythos and helps out. Sophia Achamoth then gets together with her brother the Christos, who’s been doing basically nothing all this time, and they “refresh as bridegroom and bride”(!). The essence of the Christos, conjoined with his

sister, swoops down through the middle realm and into the material, appropriating the various powers of the archons along the way (hence Christ as eagle, bull, lion, et cetera).

Now, simultaneously, Sophia Achamoth had also colluded with Ialdabaoth again (with a distinct physical context to “collude”), this time to prepare a miraculous woman to give birth without a father. There’s a little confusion about whether John is a demiurgic stooge or another agent of Sophia Achamoth, but whichever, Mary gives birth to Jesus, who at this point, although the product of a miracle, is still just a person. But then he becomes the receptacle for the arrival of the Christos into the material, and that’s when the fireworks start. Once Jesus-the-Christ starts talking, Ialdabaoth realizes he’s been taken for a ride and engineers the crucifixion in an attempt to evict the Christos from the Material. Narratives vary here based on interpreting Judas’ role.

The murder succeeds, and Jesus, or maybe a simulacrum, dies on the cross. However, the Christos cannot be evicted so easily. He ultimately ends up sitting at Ialdabaoth’s right hand, saving the dead from the demiurge’s grasp and redeeming humanity as a valid heir to true divinity, rather than being meat-puppets for a deluded pseudo-god.

One imagines Sophia Achamoth finally sitting back, perhaps a bit tired, and saying, “Never again.”

My fictional Ophian modern-day religion

Christianity, not necessarily by that name or recognized by the original Church of Rome (later to become “Roman Catholic” and “Orthodox Catholic Communion” among others), spread rapidly all around the eastern Mediterranean and throughout what we now call the Middle East. Its early development is an African, Arabian, Mesopotamian, and Persian story, and the evidence of its initial dissemination is sprinkled all through those areas, including some very old sects. Here, I’m making up such a sect, long gone from its point of origin somewhere in Syria, but still found here and there throughout the world via immigration. As a full-on Gnostic endeavor, it was flat-out heresy to the groups which eventually defined the Church and would never have been included even pre-Nicaea.

The reason for this is simple: outright serpent-worship, “Naassene” in heresiological terms. Perhaps it’s not necessarily historically continuous with those described by Origen, but it’s no less intolerable to the entire spectrum of Abrahamic religious power. After the invention and characterization of Satan over the next few centuries, it would have become anathema and in my fictional history, it went entirely underground, for over fifteen hundred years of covert existence.

Its tenets include:

- The classic Gnostic belief that Ialdabaoth is a usurper and essentially malevolent being, and that humanity’s only option is to endure and defy his influence.
- Looking to Ophis, the serpent, as the source of insight and guidance for humanity in this nigh-impossible task
 - I’m totally leaving out the evil Ophiomorphos twin because that’s confusing and annoying; we can figure that is “some other sect” which did not survive
- Taking “we are the Christians” very seriously
 - Christ gathers up souls and keeps them safe from the Demiurge.
 - Hell and damnation ... probably puts a whole new spin on Revelations considering who’s going into the bad zone.

They also practice nigh-pathological *taqiyya*, which is to say, nominally participating in mainstream rites and keeping their genuine faith unspoken, to a degree which would seem practically nuts if it weren’t for good reason. You can’t get these guys to disclose for love nor money. Their actual observances are

outwardly in conformity with more familiar practice but privately altered. I figure that in the States, if you ask what religion they practice, they'll say "Catholic" and name whatever church they attend occasionally, probably Syriac Catholic.

Primary metaphysics and values

There's no real body of theory available to practitioners, because if there were any scholars refining the creed and seeking synthesis or consistency, they probably scribbled stuff in secret notebooks and hid them in building cornerstones, to be destroyed and lost forever via urban renewal. It's part of the practice to say that the textual Bible is all they need (probably the Syriac version originally, but later adapted to the Vulgate), as any fool can see the real story once his or her eyes have been opened to the truth.

But it's apparent through observation that they aren't like Cathars or those denialists described in detail by King. The arcane implications of "this world is a lie" are not all that crucial to observants. The whole "overcoming desire," "reality is a snare," "don't listen to your senses" thing ... well, instead of going all Skoptsky here, I'm saying that this is the usual blather of holy men and hard-core political radicals, but of no particular interest to practitioners in ordinary life.

In brief, gods and uber-gods are too heady a brew. The days of looking Ialdabaoth in the eye and chatting with the Christos are over. And anyway, doctrinally, the battle's been won, right? The Christos now frees them from bondage. "To escape" the illusion while alive is only for mystics and madmen. A deeply in-Christ person might be able to see through it as he goes along, but that's all.

So what's the point of true knowledge, then? Well, "the illusion" is by no means license. The material world may be delusion, but what you do and think *in* it does matter. Steadfastness is a core precept, enduring what the "veil of tears" may throw at you. Also, defiance by example, both self-directed and in comportment toward others.

Creed and practice

The deceptive world is a dangerous place as such, and its overseers are intrinsically malevolent. The archons are conceived as active entities, and still specifically dangerous even though cosmically weakened by the Christos. A person may avoid much suffering by becoming wise to them.

The catalogue of catechism or hadiths or whatever you want to call it adds up to these points.

1. Don't be fooled by others' lies.
2. Don't lie to yourself.
3. Don't lie to others. (Here's the tricky one, given the *taqiyya* thing; there's a whole subset of practices to deflect like a motherfucker, with a get-out-of-jail-free clause for lying in emergencies.)
4. Keep your faith, gnosis, and practice steadfast. This is crucial, because it's deemed to be the literal expression of Christos in the world.
5. Live in this world regardless.

The Enemy

Here the heresiologists' names are combined with more familiar ones. As a fictional conceit, I suggest that the Naassene practices came to use the more familiar names and folded in the associated concepts.

	Essence	Nuances	Buzzwords	Associated names
Michael , Who is Like God	Pure death	No explanation, no point, nothing	courage, strength, truth, success, faith	
Suriel , Secrets of God, God's Command	Murder, as means or as end	Pride, arrogance, ill-will	justice, fairness, harmony	<i>Raguel</i>

Raphael , God's Healing	Intellectual submission	Rationalization, distraction	healing, communication, knowledge, vision	
Gabriel , Man of God	Faithful submission	Blind faith as virtue, God's will	protection, intuition, clarity, discipline	
Barachiel , Blessing of God	Suffering	Injustice, pain, grief, misfortune	blessing, guardianship, prayer, sorrows, mercy	<i>Zadkiel, Salaphiel</i> Thauthabaoth
Samael , Severity of God	Killing for a cause	Ostensible purpose, soullessness	stamina, victory, courage, leadership, passion	Entaoth
Uriel , Fire of God	Extravagant destruction	Fire, madness, psychosis	peace, wisdom, light, understanding, change, hope	<i>Ramiel, Onoel,</i> Thartharaoth

You can't fight an angel. You defy them, and express their defeat by Christos, by withstanding the suffering, by understanding its origins and by refusing to submit to deceptions. Also, the angels have a modernized post-medieval look, pretty standard iconography in mainstream terms, consistent the general historical trend to humanize them from the *whatever-the-fuck* they're textually supposed to be.

Rite and ritual

Daily and weekly, practice is totally personal. Despite cinematic temptation, I think the fiction demands that there are no covert but easily-rumbled practices like chanting over pet snakes and scrawling glyphs on the insides of doors. Adherents probably know a number of ritual phrases and observances which aren't identifiable as such at all by an observer, and that's it. Two thousand years of actionable heresy will do that, I think.

I can't imagine any religion with these roots failing to celebrate the winter and spring equinoxes. The mainstream rites are practiced overtly, then are retro-converted in private. The only time that Naassene practice could be observed is for private family stuff: weddings, funerals, births, and confirmations.

Idle speculation

Theoretically, the textual elevation of thought and wisdom and truth would seem to point to hyper-intellectualism, reverence for Occam's Razor and rigorous critique of all kinds. Then again, the quiet preservation of faith, based on tight knit and secretive ties, cannot help but be family-centric and elders-dominated, demanding conservatism.

Similarly, regarding how it might fold into the modern construction of science and religion, perhaps it's vaguely oppositional. A hypothesis test may merely be a dog chasing its tail extra fast.

Regarding sex, all long-standing religions are socially conservative no matter what their texts say. The teachings about Sophia Achamoth's sexual adventurings probably do the Song of Solomon trick: "Yes, it *looks* like a guy fondling a woman's breasts, but that's not what it really means."

Influences, references, and thoughts

Genre

Comics are the main thing. The outstanding and spot-on influences are *Box Office Poison*, *Hate*, *Beg the Question*, *Wendel*, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, *Eyebeams*, *Essex County*, *Through the Habitrails*, and the *Alec* trilogy: *The King Canute Crowd*, *How to Be an Artist*, and *After the Snooter*. You can find this approach all the way back in the early days of *Doonesbury*. More literally autobiographical but still in the zone are *Colin Upton's Big Thing*, *Persepolis*, *It's a Good Life if You Don't Weaken*, *Maus*, *Dori Stories*, *Life of the Party*, and *David Chelsea in Love*, all of which can be traced back to *American Splendor*.

I'm not including *Stuck Rubber Baby*, *From Hell*, *Age of Bronze*, *Berlin*, *Finder*, *Jar of Fools*, *Fun Home*, or any series with more strict emphasis on "novel," despite some overlap.

TV and film don't do what this game is supposed to do very well. Exceptions include *Seinfeld* at its best and, stylistically, films directed by Robert Altman. The only book I know which really nails it is *Still Life with Traveler* by Barry Gifford.

Gnostics

See Charles William King, *The Gnostics and Their Remains* (1887); Mark H. Gaffney, *Gnostic Secrets of the Naassenes*; Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*; Burton Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*; and Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer* and *The Prince of Darkness*. As usual, occultism and New Age stuff merely gum up the literature, with crazy numerology and the usual Golden Dawn obsession with shoehorning astrology into everything.

Games

Nicotine Girls, *Dirty Secrets*, and *Ribbon Drive* all use conversational, personal techniques that influenced this design; Frederik J. Jensen's *Montsegur 1244* is the only naturalistic Gnostic game; more fantastical Gnostic content is found in *Nobilis*, *Kult*, and a ton of stuff by Ken Hite.

Math

See Nicolai Vorobiev, *Fibonacci Numbers*, for the solid academic math; Renna Shesso's *Math for Mystics* for a curiously different perspective; and Alfred S. Posamentier and Ingmar Lehmann, *The (Fabulous) Fibonacci Numbers* for a fun and colorful summary.

Music

The song "Sunday Morning" by the Velvet Underground on their *The Velvet Underground & Nico* album (1967); the song "Shine a Light" by the Rolling Stones on their *Exile on Main St.* album (1972); and the Grateful Dead's album *American Beauty* (1970), especially the opening song "Box of Rain." I also found a band called Ophian on the internet, but they sounded like Ozzy Fudd doing "Kill the Wabbit" (1994), except without being funny, and therefore I cannot include them as an influence.

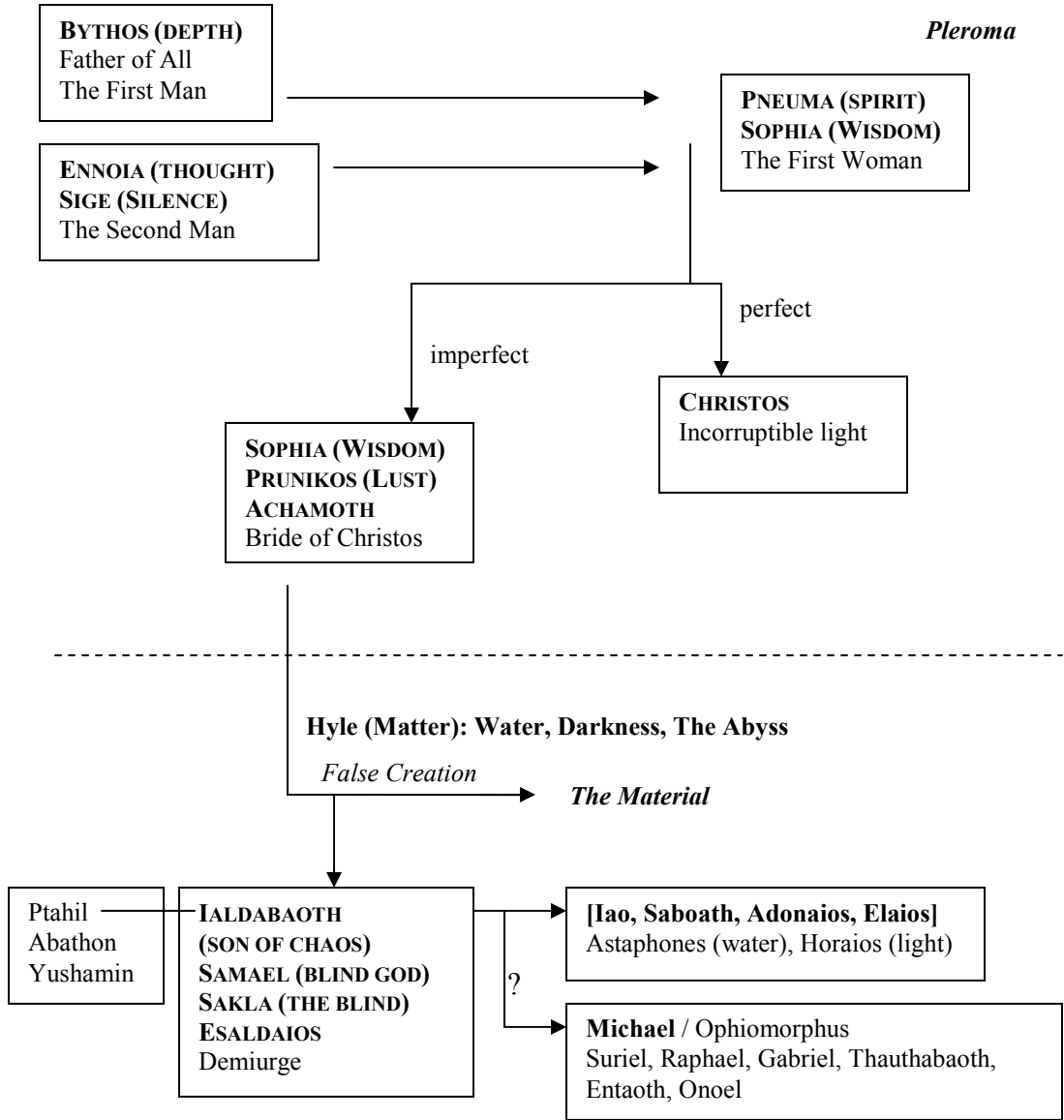
The world around

Once I started looking, it's alarming to see how prevalent angels are in modern culture. The fuckers are all over the place! First is the religious presence, which I suppose only makes sense except that they are scarily consistent across what are supposed to be essential and irrevocable schisms and differences among faiths. Sure, redefine Jesus, God, the prophets, and the texts left and right, but Michael is Michael whether you're hard-core Jewish Orthodox or Wahab Muslim or snake-handling edge Baptist. I get the idea that mucking with that material is an instant fail.

Second is their presence in systems which purport to reject traditional religion. Satanists, occultists, and New Agers all loove angels.

Finally, it goes beyond religion, way beyond. They're used as visual and verbal touchpoints for freaking everything. You open mainstream catalogues for kids' toys and room decorations, and unsurprisingly there are no little stuffed figures for Jesus or whoever, but there are the angels, unavoidable. There's even a brand of toilet paper called Angel Soft; what's *that* about?

I found it creatively instructive to look at the angels all over the place from the fictional outlook of the Ophian character concept.



BYTHOS (DEPTH)
Father of All
The First Man

ENNOIA (THOUGHT)
SIGE (SILENCE)
The Second Man

Pleroma

PNEUMA (SPIRIT)
SOPHIA (WISDOM)
The First Woman

CHRISTOS
Incorruptible light

Middle Realm

SOPHIA (WISDOM)
PRUNIKOS (LUST)
ACHAMOTH
Bride of Christos

The Material

IALDABAOTH (SON OF CHAOS)
SAMAEL (BLIND GOD)
SAKLA (THE BLIND)
ESALDAIOS
Demiurge

[Iao, Saboath, Adonaios, Elaios]
Astaphones (water), Horaios (light)

Michael / Ophiomorphus
Suriel, Raphael, Gabriel, Thauthabaoth,
Entaoth, Onoel / Thartharaoth

