

# Rælic

(working title)

Alpha game idea  
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 will be a *project* for you, not a dalliance. It doesn't hand you stuff to imagine, but requires some solid creativity, including an initial 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 concepts

It's played in phases which move backward through time. When you're playing a later phase (in real chronology), the events precede things you already know in the fiction. Part of the fun is dealing with more and more constraints on content given your knowledge of future events. Just how causal you'd like to be with that content, in terms of the fictional future, is up to you.

## The setting

The setting is a church – not solely a physical building, although buildings and architecture are important, but the church as an *institution*, a significant feature of society. 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.

You make up the religion in question yourself, drawing upon whatever imagery and terms are most associated with the general concept of such a church in your mind. To some extent that forces a certain fantastic disconnection from reality. It's not set in our real history. That doesn't mean the setting must have supernatural elements, but it must be a little bit objectified and

perhaps cartoon-ized, in order to sustain such elements as, say, "priestly robes" or a "holy city" without immediately becoming a historically-referenced concept.

It should feature one or more central personal figures. 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.

The technological status of the society at the start of play may be set by you at any level prior to the real-world 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***"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.

### *Your church*

You're making up a church as an *institution* at a particular moment in your setting's history, not a whole religion or its history at every one of these levels. What matters most is its manifestation as an institution with changing relationships to the other levels in that list of terms. The characters you will create are members of that institution and operate primarily within its confines. Therefore think visually and dramatically, in terms of architecture, formal hierarchy, clothing, and ritual, and not of the details of doctrine or belief.

Two physical items serve as touchpoints for the institution's identity in each phase of play, specifically the church's members' own institutional history and its stated doctrines. One is a **page** from the sacred texts, specifically one which is well-known and likely to be cited regarding various doctrinal points. Playing back through the historical phases of the church reveals how this page has undergone periodic revision, but all the while is regarded as an original, divine source. The other is a **skull** said to be the relic of an important personage whose experiences, words, or actions are described on that page. Playing back through the historical phases of the church ultimately reveals who this person really was and what they really did.

### *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 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 mentioning 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 the compilation and ordering of texts, for immediate organizational purposes, is at least as important as the texts' individual content, some of which is obscured in the combination.

Another wrinkle is the production of a book, i.e., a physical printed work which is then widely distributed and intended as a definitive source or guide. The target for such things is not those ignorant of the religion, but rather whatever local traditions it happens to be taking in a given area which may not reflect proper subordination to the groups issuing the book.

What I'm saying is that sacred texts are institutional items, compiled, organized, framed, and distributed according to the 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 an account into didactic instruction despite making no sense as such. The purpose of such a book is to construct a meta-narrative which is only slightly supported by the

points made in each section, and to create meta-characters which override the words, actions, and themes illustrated by the characters in each section.

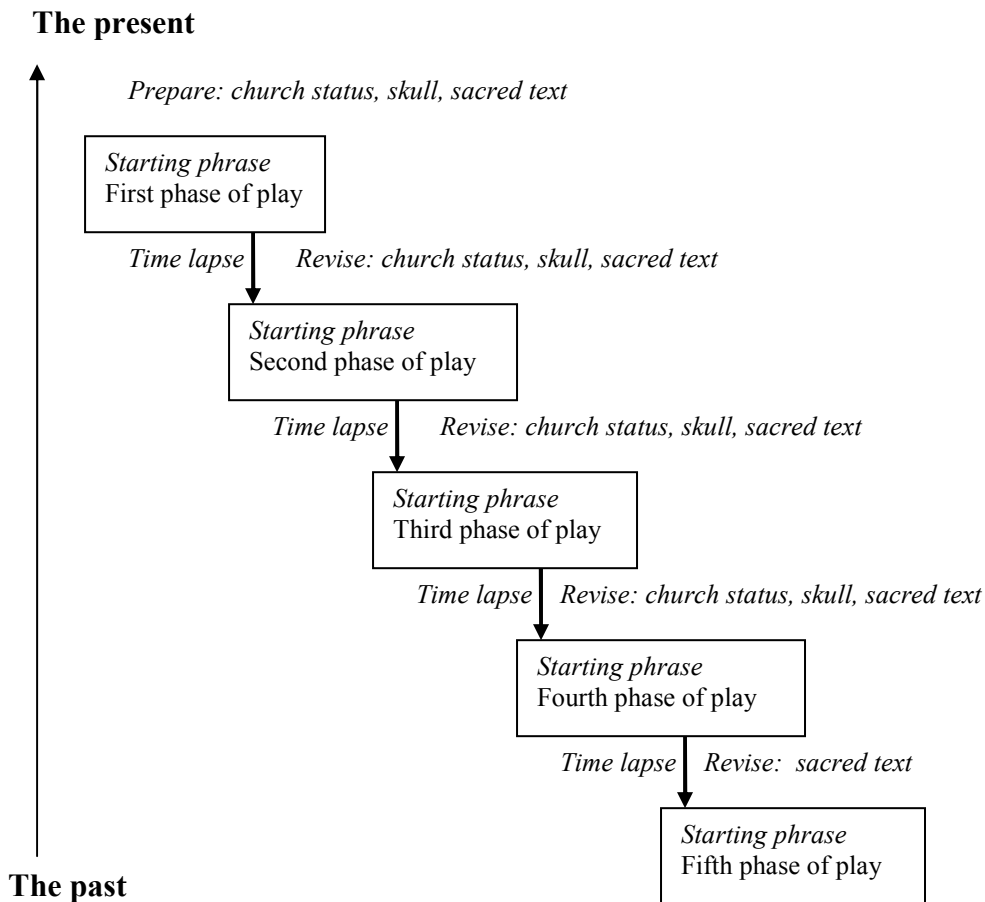
As part of preparation, you'll compose a page of sacred text at a late stage of institutional development. It will serve as the spine of play, which moves backwards through time, uncovering layers of institutional adjustments to its content.

## Structure of play

To prepare, you randomly identify the current status of the church in society and the current use and physical status of the skull in the church, using provided lists. You also write a short section of religious text to certain specifications.

Play itself is carried out in five phases, each moving further back in the history of the setting. The first four draw upon the current church status, the skull situation, and the page of text, as well as a prompting phrase to start. Between each of these, you randomly determine how far you are moving backwards in time, and prepare again for the next phase, i.e. earlier in the fictional chronology, with the same random determinations and also revising, or rather, un-revising, some details of the page of sacred text.

The fifth and final phase differs in that the events take place prior to the founding of the church, and one of the characters is the person whose skull has been observed throughout play so far.



### *Daydream play*

Within each phase of play, beginning with a key provided phrase, you play strictly by sitting quietly and turning your attention inward, to imagine characters in their situations. You do not need to speak or write anything, nor will you use any quantitative or physical devices.

You will rely upon specific, limited touchpoints to help focus and unify your thoughts: the status of the church, the skull, the opening phrase; as well as certain finishing points. But as far as imagery, action, characterization, moments of crisis, and consequences are concerned, it's all up to you, in the moment.

### **P**reparation

Randomly determine the current status of the church in society for the first, chronologically most recent phase of play.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Folded into another church. This means the phases already played, if any, actually represent the conquering church with the one we're interested in deeply embedded in it, and play in this phase is getting something of a new start as now we're seeing what it was like while it was taken over and reinterpreted.
- In schism. The church has become split, possibly with differing titular heads of authority, and with different organizations and interpretations of its texts. Membership in one 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.

Once a given status for the church is established for a given phase of play, cross it off the list. This will be done four times, so the combinations will differ across instances of play.

After the first phase, in which the church status is determined at random, you may either use random methods or choose which status will be next. Remember, though, you're playing backwards in time. That leads to some fun opportunities in later phases of play.

- If the schism comes up in phases 2-4, 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 in phases 2-4, then everything played so far was actually the secondary, larger church that engulfed it. This requires sort of a reboot, in that everything to be played from this point on *ends* in this current phase.
- If the height-of-power comes up in phases 2-4, 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.

### *The text*

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. 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, that will fit into the space constraints. 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 *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.

The physical state of this text is fixed for the first phase depending on the status of the church. Only one of the following descriptions is used for play, associated with the starting phase, i.e., most chronologically recent status of the church. The physical nature of the texts from older periods in the fiction will be determined through play.

*Discriminated against:* The page is found in two kinds of document. One is a big, heavily-bound book, 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, including the name of the church in very technical terms to distinguish it from the mainstream religion.

*At the height of societal power:* The page is one of thousands in a gorgeously-produced, solidly-bound book 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 printing methods can make them.

*Part of the establishment:* 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 quite gory or racy, but all the characters have upwardly-gazing, noble expressions. Its cover includes the holy symbol and a generic title like "The Sacred Book."

*Folded into another church:* The page is found in a secondary book, bound similarly to a larger and more impressive primary book. 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 book. Its solid 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, printed 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.

### ***The skull***

Note whose skull it is supposed to be, choosing any of the persons mentioned in the page of sacred text.

Randomly (always) determine the disposition of the skull relative to the church

- 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

Once a given disposition for the skull is established for a given phase of play, cross it off the list. This will be done four times, so all options will be seen in play, although not always in the same order.

### ***Phase 1***

You've already arrived randomly at the current status of the church in society and composed the holy text according to the starting instructions.

You've already arrived randomly at the disposition of the skull relative to the church, as well as its presumed identity. Also state the physical condition of the skull – this may be anything, but keep in mind that you will be playing backwards through centuries, so start with something you can improve.

### ***Play***

Imagine people who are part of the church hierarchy and whose lives are conducted almost entirely on church property. For phase 1, initiate the events with the phrase *Two of these people are making love.*

Then daydream! Conduct no written activity at all. In your daydream, come up with some character enmeshed in romance, ambition, life or death, parenthood, or anything along those lines. Whatever it is, doctrinal application of that particular piece of holy text is relevant to it. Think about the other people he or she must cope with in this situation; feel free to invent bureaucracy, titles, ranks, and current priorities as you see fit.

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

Then take it from there, thinking about the characters, their faces and actions and what they say to one another, shifting 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.

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.

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. For instance, whether anything happens to the skull, and if so, what, may or may not be part of your imagined experience.

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 *one to 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, context of some explicit instruction, whether a narrated event is written as a lesson, the interjection of magical content, and separating any described event into distinct components.

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.

If you see a gap to fill, put something in. If you see something that seems imposed onto the text, take it out.

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

### *Phases 2-4*

Arrive randomly at how many years this phase precedes the one just played: 3d100 years. Once only, you may use 10d100 instead. Briefly consider technological and cultural differences.

Fictionally, the older version of the sacred page is a different physical object. Keep in mind that having moved earlier in history, the technology of printing texts, or producing them in any fashion prior to printing, may be less sophisticated. Do not use the provided descriptions! They were only for the initial phase of play and are no longer relevant.

Choose *or* arrive randomly at the current status of the church in society, using the same list as before excluding all the options used previously.

Arrive randomly (always in these phases) at the disposition of the skull relative to the church, using the same list as before excluding all the options used previously.

State the physical condition of the skull, which can be identical to or better than the condition used previously.

Then, play exactly as before. Use the predecessor document, without the Discovered changes, as the contemporary one for this phase. Use any of these initiating phrases, one per phase.

- *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 these phases, think of points of comparison with material already played, and 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 create the new, i.e., chronologically antecedent document for each phase, using each one successively throughout the phases.

#### ***For phase 4***

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.

Upon completing the fourth phase, and hence your fifth version of the holy text's page, move to the final phase.

#### **Final phase**

Arrive at the time difference as before, but if you have not yet exercised the 10d100 year option, use it now.

- The church does not yet exist as an institutional power.
- The person whose skull was featured in all the other phases of play is alive during this time period.
- Examine the latest (i.e. earliest in the fictional chronology) text carefully. It does not yet exist either. It will be written in reference to events played during this phase. It may be written by this person, or not; it may be written during the events played, or at some point

later, during the time interval you just rolled. But one way or another, the events played will give rise to the document you have just reviewed.

Daydream those events. Your initiating phrase is *Whatever this person is doing*. This time, your signal to stop is the resolution of the immediate human drama; there is no Discovery.

Play is now finished.

If you desire, take all five 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.

## Example

I used an online dice roller set at 1-5 sides to find that the church is currently in schism.

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

Of the armies of Dovia, some four thousand lay slain, but of the Sabissians, not one in three did leave the battlefield. The dead lay in the fields, in the paths, and in the shallows of the river, and red blood soaked all other colors. Through the lands arose the cries of defeat and submission.

Following his victory, Xephis presided over their fields, houses, and slaves. Over Abbias' protests, he accepted the pledges of the Sabissian men of all ranks and executed those who refused. He divided the noble wives among himself and his generals and cast out the rest of the women as exiles. They were seen no more.

Abbias and his allies complained, saying these gifts impoverished them and that they were cheated of spoils. Epham Cro then took Xephis aside, saying, "Mercy to the vanquished is praised by God, but unlucky is the ruler who denies his allies." And he told him the three principles by which a ruler must abide should he seek to live and to leave strong heirs: The conquered must remain so; No chieftain is loved; Bestow riches rather than hoard them.

Now Kneba, newest wife of Xephis and once queen of Sabissia, brought him her grievances as well, and Xephis spoke angrily, that he was beset by foes, allies, advisors, and wife alike. He put himself aside from all who would speak to him. That night brought the stench of death to the cities and farms and all through the land, and the people cried aloud from visions. Skulls rose from the lake of blood and the women were dragged therein, where the many-eyed serpent coils and the lights shine forth from where there is no lamp to burn.

Kneba urged Xephis to heed her, and he blamed her for the land's troubles. He brought all the people to the Hill, and there he judged her, saying, "This land must find favor with God." Then she was indeed broken, burned, and sectioned in the manner of the Dovians of old, and the land did prosper thereupon.

Epham Cro left the court of Xephis. He tore his clothes and passed the flame of a torch across his body, and then he did go across the land. In his path people built the new temples, in their number ten score, to be exalted, and the priests grew powerful therein.

And thus this land would no longer be called Sabissia, but Knebia Hulla, which is to say, in memory of Kneba.

What's going on? Well, I have no idea. That's part of the point. You can see that this account is full of strange holes. Are the three principles espoused by Epham Cro to be interpreted as doctrine, or does the story refute them? Why is the land named after the wife, of all people? What were her grievances? Is Xephis being held up as a rightful ruler or a foolish tyrant? What is up with that hallucinogenic splatter porn in the middle? What are the temples about? I did not write the text with any answers in mind, nor even any of these questions, but merely threw out some events in a way which indicates the original was being read by people who already knew the story, and hence as written, are nearly uninterpretable by others. I stuck in the gore to round it out.

This page is found in two different versions of the holy texts. One of them is a solidly-bound, well-produced book. Its solid cover is embossed with the church's holy symbol, with no titling or explanation of its contents.

The symbol looks like this:



(image by Val Powell, copied from elfwood.com without permission)

In this text, the section containing the sacred page is placed in historical sequence, celebrating a series of rulers in a dynasty, with Xephis being fourth or fifth in the series but given primary place as the most significant.

The other is a collection of pamphlets combined in a simpler, flexible binding, printed more crudely, titled "The Holy Books Restored." Its first section is titled "On the Betrayal of Our Prophets" and explains that the other version of the holy text is compromised through error and perfidious mis-use. The section containing the page in question is placed first in a series of prophetic episodes all decrying the outrages of tyrants. Note that the specific text of this page is exactly the same in both versions of the book.

I rolled a d4 to find that the skull's location is unknown and desperately sought. I decided that it is said to be the skull of the prophet Epham Cro.

### ***Phase 1: the present***

#### *Two people are making love*

It's difficult to explain what happened in play, because an account of what I imagined here is not the same as the process of imagining it. The process is a bit chaotic. For the most part it's linear, but sometimes ideas and images get retrofitted into what's already happened. Also, flashes of imagery sometimes appear and must be captured without analysis, and only then given plot content.

My mind produced two environments as the story rocketed along. One was the serene, tall-ceiling, many-corridor established church, with much maroon and black, with light filtering in through crystalline, long, narrow windows. The officials and clerics wore hats sort of like those of Catholic bishops, and they had uniformly stern, shaven, serious faces. The other was the

strangely jumbled, enclosed locations of the rebel side of the schism, operating partly in secret – I got the impression that it was associated with the mercantile side of society, like Huguenots in 17<sup>th</sup> century France, and therefore met or stored stuff in places like dockside warehouses.

The technology and culture felt like slightly superficial, movie or comics version of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, with clockworks, serviceable but not yet high-tech pistols, (to our eyes) primitive sense of sanitation and plumbing, yet all with this gleaming, weird frosty glass. Cloth hung everywhere. Maybe there was some Venetian influence, as there were a lot of canals, boats, and water travel once things moved outside. The visual style was unequivocal at the beginning: all Möbius and P. Craig Russell, with tall slender people, close-fitting hoods, and angular features, and soaring, weird architecture.

The story itself concerned a woman committed to the schismatic, rebellious side of the church, and her lover, a man serving as an inquisitor's investigator for the establishment side. They met in the secret, unknown rooms of the church. He is specifically tasked with finding the skull because the establishment church wants to bolster its interpretation of the pro-authority content of the sacred page, by displaying the relic. He eventually finds that she had located the skull, which is pretty broken up, incomplete, with lots of scorch marks, but instead of taking it for his authorities, he protects her and misleads the inquisitors.

Things go badly for them as the schism breaks into civil war, and ultimately he fights her pursuers, dying to cover her escape by boat through the canals of the city. All the fight-and-chase derring-do was quite dramatic in my mind, and looked like the action sequences in the 1970s Musketeer films. She escapes to bring the skull to a disgraced, miserable scholar, a friend to her side of the schism, who discovers that the bottom of the box it's in is actually a very old printing of the sacred text.

The scholar reads the page to discover it is not quite like the text he knows so well.

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### *Phase 2: 194 years before*

I chose to make the church a part of the establishment, and as determined by rolling a d3 the skull is displayed prominently and centrally. Its pieces arranged in its ordinary shape, but they would otherwise fall apart, and the scorch marks are present.

The sacred text is found in a serviceable, sturdy bound book, distinctly of lower technology than in the first phase of play. There are innumerable copies owned by ordinary practitioners. The cover is embossed the title, "Holy Book" with the same symbol. The pages have a high linen content and their edges are rough. The content is organized in the fashion observed as the primary, societally-established branch of the church two centuries later, with the section containing the sacred page placed in historical sequence, celebrating a series of rulers in a dynasty, with Xephis being fourth or fifth in the series but given primary place as the most significant.

### *Clerks and scribes argue a professional point*

Here, my imaginings ran to a distinctly different look to the community, implying a significant technological shift in the intervening two centuries. It's more like pre-industrial Berlin, being six or seven distinct large towns which share common roadways and waterways; the roads were mainly dirt or gravel rather than paved, and the riverbanks were not as built up throughout their course. The same church buildings are present, obviously new or even still under construction, implying very recent innovations in architectural concepts. Their windows are mainly boarded, awaiting the installation of the "new" glass.

I thought of an intellectually spirited, but ultimately comfortable, non-threatening debate among the scribes in a secular academy of some kind, with one participant in church vestments but with no special authority in the group. This person, a man (as were all the church officials in this phase), leaves the gathering with a troubled mind, as some of the others had spoken of possible nuances of translation that he knows might be relevant to this sacred text, although it was not the topic of conversation.

At the church, he prays alone for a long time, in the prayer hall which is overseen by a dramatic construct whose central feature is the mounted skull. The skull played no other role in this sequence besides this powerful visible presence.

My mind then changed gears and skipped fast through the years, as the man becomes ordained, respected, promoted, and powerful in the church hierarchy, as the church itself ambles along as a significant but complacent part of society. In his private study, he has amassed a careful re-interpretation of the sacred text, and now, he finds ancient documents which corroborate his suspicions that key mistranslations had changed its meaning.

Before he dies, he destroys his work, and this knowledge is lost. The page as he discovered it reads:

Of the armies of Dovia, some four **hundred** lay slain, but of the Sabissians, not one in three did leave the battlefield. The dead lay in the fields, in the paths, and in the shallows of the river, and red blood soaked all other colors. Through the lands arose the cries of defeat and submission.

Following his victory, Xephis presided over their fields, houses, and slaves. Over Abbias' protests, he accepted the pledges of the Sabissian men of all ranks and executed those who refused. He divided the noble wives among himself and his generals and in his foolishness cast out the rest of the women as exiles. They were seen no more.

Abbias and his allies complained, saying these gifts impoverished them and that they were cheated of spoils. Epham Cro then took Xephis aside, saying, "Mercy to the vanquished is praised by God, but unlucky is the ruler who denies his allies." And he told him the three principles by which a ruler must abide should he seek to live and to leave strong heirs: The conquered always win in the end; No chieftain is loved; Bestow riches rather than hoard them.

Now Kneba, newest wife of Xephis and once queen of Sabissia, brought him her grievances as well, and Xephis spoke angrily, that he was beset by foes, allies, advisors, and wife alike. He put himself aside from all who would speak to him. That night brought the stench of death to the cities and farms and all through the land, and the people cried aloud from visions. Skulls rose from the lake of blood [~~deleted~~], where the many-eyed serpent coils and the lights shine forth from where there is no lamp to burn. **And the women of Sabissia came forth in their numbers.**

Kneba urged Xephis to heed her, and he blamed her for the land's troubles. He brought all the people to the Hill, saying, "God will judge between us." Then **he** was indeed broken, burned, and sectioned in the manner of the Dovians of old, and the land did prosper thereupon.

Epham Cro left the court of Xephis. He tore his clothes and passed the flame of a torch across his body, and then he did go across the land. In his path people built the new temples, in their number ten score, to be exalted, and the priests grew powerful therein.

And thus this land would no longer be called Sabissia, but Knebia Hulla, which is to say, in memory of Kneba.

### ***Phase 3: 99 years before (293 years ago)***

The church is folded into another, and as determined by rolling a d2, the skull is kept secret and secure. It is definitely very old and a little beaten up, but not as fragmented as observed in the future, and not burned.

The technology of the book isn't much different from that seen a century later, except that the stitching is thicker and the covers have triangular metal caps at the corners. What matters most, though, is that the book is one of several auxiliary or supportive texts of a primary book, having existed until now on its own. The primary book has the symbol that I'm familiar with from phases 1 and 2. But the book of "my" church has another symbol, which obviously becomes lost to text and history sometime in the next century. So this is the actual original symbol:



(Image by "Michael5000," from the blog State of the Craft; used without permission)

The accompanying context of the sacred page is about the same as seen 99 years in the future.

*A council of authorities meet to discuss a recent execution*

This time, my mind began with a panoramic, high-perspective sweep. What it saw: the landscape of the township-complex is not much different, except that there is no indication of the future major church building sites, and there are many more, active foundries and smithies, creating a fiery and smoky environment. People use the waterways as the primary travel route; roads are not as complete and are generally ill-tended. A lot of makeshift or recently built-up areas indicate a recent influx of newcomers, bulking up the local population.

Then I cut to the council, which is mainly composed of members of the dominant church, all men, with one exception being the representative of the minor church, also a man, who isn't permitted to say much. The execution in question ended the life of the last vocal agitator against the official absorption of the minor church, and the council members want to be sure that this representative knows that all opposition to the textual and doctrinal changes is to be ended. He agrees quite submissively.

But when he goes to the actual worship at the church in question, which is carried out in long, low stone buildings in a particular town-area, boy, is it hard core. First, both men and women lead rites. Second, they are naked and ecstatic rites. Third, they involve fire, as in, huge fires, with bright explosions and wide beds of coals, and brandished torches.

He strips to the waist, revealing the knotted scars of previous burns, and he and similarly-marked high members of the church confer. Here, he isn't submissive at all – they agree to commit to protecting their sacred book from taint, and he undergoes a totally horrifying burning ritual, becoming, after a year of recovery, a nigh-monstrous sacred warrior intended to be a rallying prophet figure for a rebellion.

It doesn't go well. The people of the towns prefer the new ways and the new business growth and life-styles, and they don't mind the diminution of the old religion. Our main character and his followers turn to assassination and terror in an attempt to establish control. That goes poorly too, and a Masada situation develops. The sect, now reduced to less than a thousand extremist supporters, must barricade itself in a stronghold to resist a massed militia effort to capture them.

In that stronghold, holding their sacred skull, they conduct a mass self-immolation. As the smoke is overcoming them, the main character is holding the oldest version of the sacred texts that they were able to find (not wanting to use the compromised official version described above), and reading from it ... to discover that it's saying not what he thought it would.

Of the armies of Dovia, some four hundred lay slain, but of the Sabissians, not one in three did leave the battlefield. The dead lay in the fields, in the paths, and in the shallows of the river, and red blood soaked all other colors. Through the lands arose the cries of defeat and submission.

Following his victory, Xephis presided over their fields, houses, and **goats**. Over Abbias' protests, he accepted the pledges of the Sabissian men of all ranks and executed those who refused. He divided the noble wives among himself and his generals and in his foolishness cast out the rest of the women as exiles. They were seen no more.

Abbias and his allies complained, saying these gifts impoverished them and that they were cheated of spoils. Epham Cro then took Xephis aside, saying, "Mercy to the vanquished is praised

by God, but unlucky is the ruler who denies his allies." And he told him the three principles by which a ruler must abide should he seek to live and to leave strong heirs: The conquered always win in the end; No chieftain is loved; Bestow riches rather than hoard them.

**Then did Kneba, newest wife of Xephis and once queen of Sabissia, lie with Ephem Cro, and the king grew angry. He released Abbias and his warriors upon the land, and they** brought the stench of death to the cities and farms and all through the land, and the people cried aloud from visions. Skulls rose from the lake of blood, where the many-eyed serpent coils and the lights shine forth from where there is no lamp to burn. And the women of Sabissia came forth in their numbers.

Kneba urged Xephis to heed her, and he blamed her for the land's troubles. He brought all the people to the Hill, saying, "God will judge between us." Then he was indeed broken, burned, and sectioned in the manner of the Dovians of old, and the land did prosper thereupon.

Ephem Cro ~~deleted~~ tore his clothes and passed the flame of a torch across his body, and then he did go across the land. In his path people built the new temples, in their number ten score, to be exalted, and the priests grew powerful therein.

And thus this land would no longer be called Sabissia, but Knebia Hulla, which is to say, in memory of Kneba.

#### *Phase 4: 600 years before (893 years ago)*

I chose to exercise the option to roll 10d100 this time. I rolled d2 to choose between the last two church options, finding that it is discriminated against. For the skull, I'm left with the last remaining option, which is that it is kept under formal care with limited access; also, it is still enflashed. It's mummified and wrapped, kept in a pottery container with preserving herbs.

With such a long time shift, the sacred text looks really different in this phase: hand-lettered ink thin rolled paper or papyrus scrolls, some using fine leather, all cased in ornately-worked protective tubes. It's a unique item to the local church and most people have no access to the text at all; it's kept under similar care as the skull, or rather, head.

#### *A young person is formally initiated into church membership*

My imagery here was up-close and personal, without any context for buildings or landscapes. The ritual uses fire. Not in a fetishistic way as previously observed, and no one is burned or hurt. It's certainly pagan to my eyes, with lots of naked ladies conducting the rites, which includes reading from the sacred page and a display of the head, which is quickly returned to its wrappings and protective casing. The young person is a woman in her mid-teens; she is being acknowledged as an adult woman in the eyes of God.

Afterwards, I imagined more perspective, following the young woman through her day. The six-century time lapse is immediately evident; this is a low-tech, smaller-population society, whose economy depends on local river use and cottage industry. Goats are the primary domestic animal, found everywhere. The towns are distinct and separated by undeveloped land; all the action takes place in one of them. The prevailing cultural symbols are animalistic, primarily a hawk, as expressed in wall carvings. Her church has had its ancient worship sites destroyed, and new big hawk-statues in black and white stone are being put up in their place.

The people are ethnically distinct from those I've imagined in the future. The clothing is much different too, mostly robes and kilts, not trousers and dresses. She and many others wear badges on their lapels, like Japanese *mon*, with the symbol first seen in phase 3. People not wearing these

badges do not touch her, by law. When she gives respect to a passing high-ranking member of her own church, that person is wearing a weird, tall hat and clogs, moving slowly and dramatically.

This next part's cool in a totally witchy way. It turns out she has a mainstream-religion boyfriend and now comes to him in the night, painted in spooky ritual black-and-white stripes, finally able to carry out all the carnal acts she couldn't before her initiation. They meet again and again in secret, unacknowledged during the day, as she seems just another of the lower-caste crowd even as she passes him on the street. It's evident he's of high social rank, a prince or chieftain's son.

Eventually, he takes her as a wife anyway, against the law. Both defy their respective religious and social authorities, as his urge him to carry out formal and quite abusive divorce rites, and hers urge her to kill him. Neither gives in in terms of immediate demands, but ultimately, they are forced to part, living alone in sadness. As the years pass, he attains high rank and power, without joy. She is treated more harshly, considered unmarriageable by her own sect.

Wandering alone in the hills one day, she discovers a long-unknown cavern full of pottery shards – some covered with writing. The first one she reads is an older version of the same text read during her initiation:

Of the armies of Dovia, some four hundred lay slain, but of the Sabissians, not one in three did leave the battlefield. The dead lay in the fields, in the paths, and in the shallows of the river, and red blood soaked all other colors. Through the lands arose the cries of defeat and submission.

Following his victory, Xephis presided over their fields, houses, and goats. Over Abbias' protests, he accepted the pledges of the Sabissian men of all ranks and executed those who refused. He divided the noble wives among himself and his generals and in his foolishness cast out the rest of the women as exiles. They were seen no more.

Abbias and his allies complained, saying these gifts impoverished them and that they were cheated of spoils. Epham Cro then took Xephis aside, saying, "Mercy to the vanquished is praised by God, but unlucky is the ruler who denies his allies." And he told him the three principles by which a ruler must abide should he seek to live and to leave strong heirs: The conquered always win in the end; No chieftain is loved; Bestow riches rather than hoard them.

Then did Kneba, newest wife of Xephis and once queen of Sabissia, lie with Epham Cro, and the king grew angry. He released Abbias and his warriors upon the land, and they brought the stench of death to the cities and farms and all through the land, and the people cried aloud from visions. Skulls rose from the lake of blood, where the many-eyed serpent coils and the lights shine forth from where there is no lamp to burn. And the women of Sabissia came forth in their numbers **and rent Abbias and those who followed him to pieces.**

Kneba urged Xephis to heed her, and he blamed her for the land's troubles. He brought all the people to the Hill, saying, "God will judge between us." Then he was indeed broken, burned, and sectioned in the manner of the Dovians of old, and the land did prosper thereupon.

Epham Cro tore his clothes and passed the flame of a torch across his body, **and the many-eyed serpent did rise in fire from him, speaking in voices of the dead.** Then he did go across the land. In his path people built the new temples, in their number ten score, to be exalted, and the priests grew powerful therein.

And thus this land would no longer be called Sabissia, but Knebia Hulla, which is to say, in **fear** of Kneba.

I took some time to reflect on this text. It's more barbaric and exciting than I expected.

### *Fifth and final phase: 137 years before (1030 years ago)*

The church does not yet exist, the sacred text above does not yet exist in any form, and Epham Cro is alive.

### *Whatever this person is doing*

Here my job was to play to the resolution of any human drama occurred to me out of that phrase, which I did. And I've decided not to tell you about it.

Here are some of the setting details, though. It's set in a different place entirely, in a rocky, hilly landscape by the sea, a lot like the Monterey Peninsula where I grew up. There's also a very big lake some distance inland in the hills, the source of several rivers running in canyons to the sea. The people there are the same ethnicity as seen in phase 4.

## Themes

Is this about exposure of religion as a fraud, or 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 and practices arose simply through a long-term generational game of Telephone; another may produce a story in which the religion began from something quite pure and idealistic, taking different shape later through the course of history.

Go wherever your imagination brings you regarding ethical content, or even supernatural content of your fictional religion. My example was 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.

## Thoughts

For some reason, I have been almost involuntarily working on three short, extremely edgy role-playing designs focusing on different aspects of religion. The first concerns religiosity and mysticism, and the second concerns religious observance and identity. This one concerns religious institutions and society. None of them concern belief or faith, or even the direct application of doctrine to behavior.

Each one was inspired by terms I used in the 2011 rounds of the Ronnies Awards. This one used the terms "old" and "skull."

Also, each was designed specifically from extending existing theory about role-playing into new territory, on the basis of saying something like, "According to theory, this would work," as opposed to observing actual play as the foundation for the rules. Therefore each one is distinctly outside my own comfort zone of play procedures.

## 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*.

### ***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 explicitly 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.

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 version of *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970); 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).