

# Shine a Light

**Beta playtest**  
**By Ron Edwards / Adept Press**  
**April 2017**



*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.

## Introduction

This is 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: 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. It's mostly about what this person or these people habitually do, and nothing is too personal or too minor to depict. The effect may seem trivial

or even pointless, but over time, the characters' lives are illumined and grounded, and above all intimately compared with the reader's. Sex and nudity are the more subversive for being as matter of fact and incidental as everything else.

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 freedom of your opinion. The genre respects no boundaries and is famous for deconstructing, leveling, lampooning, humanizing, and exposing the author's own chosen identity politics.

5. Ongoing, 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 cartooning 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 behind 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.

### *Look and feel: the social group*

I don't know if your experiences match mine, but two or three 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.

### *Content and theme: religious observance*

Religion operates as a creative touchpoint for the game. However, the topic is not belief but observance.: the habits, routines, and modes of expression, with no reference to spiritual or metaphysical content. It's a nearly-invisible framework for dealing with stuff day to day, and socially, it operates sneakily toward self-image, assertive commentary, and making decisions. It applies even if one breaks from the institution, the beliefs associated with it, or both.

This concept is applied in the game both non-fictionally and fictionally. Non-fictionally, creating characters draws 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 closeted 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 heresy venerates 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. In other words, the serpent (Ophis) of Eden.

Which doesn't go over too well in ordinary conversation.

What does it mean to observe a religion with pedestrian moral content, yet considered abominable and kept secret? How do you live? Although your practices are secret, how does your observance respond to and affect your close friends?

## **Preparing for play**

Three to five people get together. One of you takes on the part of the Ophian player.

### *Set up the deck*

Give the Ophian card to the Ophian player.

The remaining 55 cards include:

- Six Mornings
- Two each of At School, Petty Theft, Drink/Drugs, Family, Losing the Big It, Sex, Moving Day, Public Transport, Money, An Outing, Movies/TV, At Work, Cooking, Crazy Person
- Seven Angels: Michael, Suriel, Raphael, Gabriel, Barachiel, Samiel, and Uriel

Pull out all the Angel cards and shuffle the rest face-down. Take off the top six cards without looking and set them aside. Shuffle the Angels in with the rest, oriented the same way, then set this out as a stack and put the other six cards back 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.

Leave room for four quadrants around the deck for cards to be placed. Players will also be accumulating cards, but they don’t have to organize or display them in a formal way.

### *Make the Ophian character*

One person is the Ophian player, and some details about his or her character are provided here in the rules; others are made up by the player. 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 become the “main” one.

The fixed details about the Ophian character are as follows:

- Twenty years old
- Family history includes the eastern Mediterranean
- Family is local, 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 himself or herself, going around again as needed:

- Male or female
- Virgin or not
- Lives with family or in an apartment
- Single or in a relationship
- In school full-time or part-time

Each person secretly circles which term will apply, then everyone reveals the choices.

*Example from a playtest game: Gregor, the Ophian player, takes the gender terms and passes out the rest. Everyone chooses and the portrait emerges: male, virgin, lives with family, in a relationship, in school full-time.*

The Ophian character is an observant member of a secretive faith. The Ophian Heresy pamphlet describes it in some detail, but the Ophian character is not an expert on the faith or even educated in its details. It's just an ordinary routine as a feature of his or her family, extended family, and the family’s community, not a religious drive. He or she knows the creed as described in the Ophian Player pamphlet, but not the theology or history in the Heresy pamphlet. He or she would be as thrown off by a Religious Studies class as anyone with typical observant upbringing.

The Ophian player finishes with a biblical name, 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 any of the Apostles’ names except for John, and certainly not any angel names of any kind.

To play the Ophian, put yourself in the mindset of a young person who has a conventional and vague understanding about college majors and careers, and who is used to repeating the same comfortable phrase to family and community members who pester him or her about these things and are themselves

not well-informed. In that context, come up with the Ophian character's suitably generic stated major and/or career idea, keeping in mind that such things almost never survive one's early twenties. Also decide what his or her part-time job is.

*Example: Gregor says the Ophian character's name is John and his middle name is Cain. He works part-time at a restaurant, and his ambition is to go into art – or business, something like that. He's probably the first person in his family to seek a university degree.*

### ***Make the social scene***

As a group, decide what kind of youth or young working person subculture is involved for this circle of friends. It can be an informal or formal activity, or perhaps just a location. Please keep it simple and free of elaborate back-story details, and remember that such groups are usually at least half composed of chance additions and incidental ties. 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, the pre-professional theater scene, community center work (with some very tough non-college guys on staff), a college coffee shop obviously, deeply irresponsible partying, scientific research at the lab-flunky level, and much cross-U.S. travel on no budget. Think back to what you remember doing and might not often think about now.

*Example: Gregor says the circle of friends and acquaintances formed through chance meetings at a coffee shop and has proved surprisingly stable.*

### ***Make (some of) everyone else***

The other characters are constructed from two components.

First, each person except the Ophian player writes a brief description of religious practice he or she was exposed to at some younger phase in their lives. By "exposed to," I mean *did*, not merely visited via a friend's family or something like that. List what religion it was (yes, the actual one) and how your family participated.

People fib about this! They always claim they were raised without any religion. If you hold their feet to the fire and make them admit otherwise, they'll go on and on about how it didn't mean anything to them. Maybe they think this step is more than it is. Just name the religion, say what you did, and move on.

What you write, is what the character you're making currently does.

*Example: James' character from our playtesting game is Roman Catholic, observed for holiday Mass and funerals, formally dressed. Otherwise the family doesn't go to church or talk much about religion. The character goes along with it simply because that's what's done, without discussion.*

Second, each person, Ophian player included, chooses five slips of paper of personal descriptors, social consensus views, and social connections.

- Personal look and feel
  - goofy, hot, terminally hip, the mullet, from money, hyper-intellectual, artist above all, blowhard, trivia master, 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, fish out of water
- Social connection: an identifiable historical reason for them to be involved (there may be none)
  - roommate, 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

Choose carefully or entirely at random, it doesn't matter, but don't negotiate or discuss your choices. All the chosen slips go into a mix, and then each person except the Ophian player picks one out of it at random. Once you look at it, decide whether to draw a second to combine with it, so each person finishes with either one or two slips.

Armed with the Ophian player's description of the immediate subculture or shared activity, the religious statement you wrote, and the one or two slips, arrive at an idea for this character. This is the precise moment when you abandon the notion that the character represents you, which may have arisen upon writing the religion statement.

Set his or her age within a year or two of the Ophian character's age, which is 20. Come up with a name.

*Example: James has drawn **fellow lackey at work** and **everyone's pal**. He starts putting together his impression of his character based on a slightly grim interpretation of the latter term: a bit cranky, even sour, in constant contact with his family by habit but feeling the pinch of early-twenties alienation. He names him Matthew, universally called "Matt."*

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.

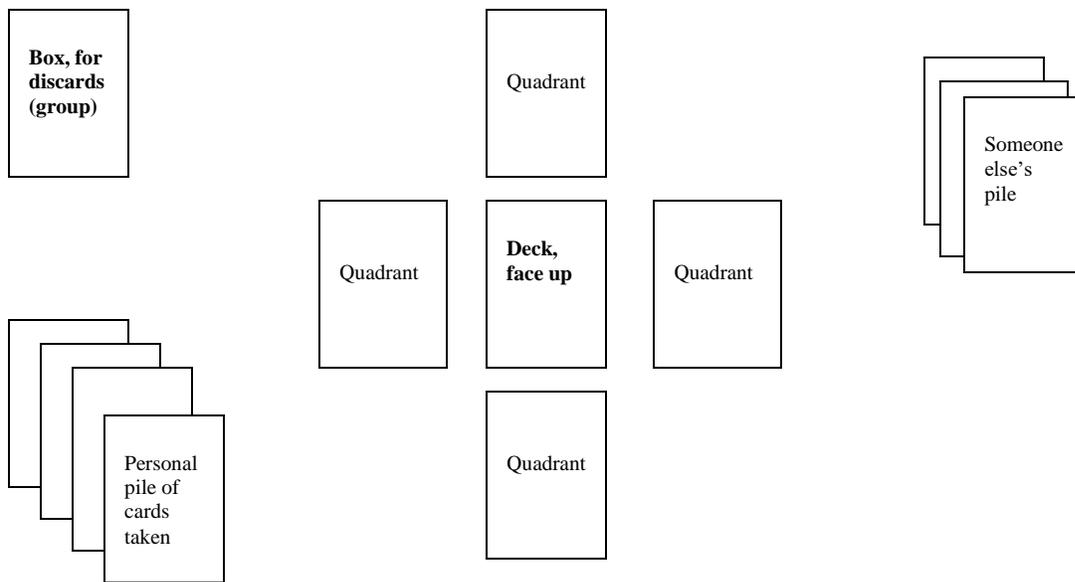
Keep the undrawn slips around because you may invent and introduce more characters at any time. You may even find that the one you've constructed at the outset fades away from the story; it all depends on how you feel as you go along.

## Talking and card play

The Ophian player starts play by turning the top card of the deck face-up, in place. Then he or she states a location and immediately-obvious circumstances for the Ophian character, including any other players' characters. 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 is conducted as a conversation in which the speakers describe anything they want, including characters' actions dialogue, in the fictional moment. Spoken input is unconstructed. People simply talk 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. Whatever is showing, feel free to bring in either known or invented details about it into the situation. At any time, anyone may move the face-up card at the top of the deck to any of the quadrants and flip the next card in the stack face-up. If a card is already present in the quadrant, then it is moved to the personal collection of that player.



Two special cards alter the process slightly. A Morning card clears the quadrants and the cards in them are discarded into the card box. It remains in place as play resumes, and in time, it will be moved to a quadrant when someone feels like revealing the next card.

When an Angel card is revealed, no more cards are drawn until its fictional requirements are met. Cards are spent from personal collections during Angel resolution and are discarded to the box. Following resolution, the Angel card is discarded to the box as well and the top card is turned face-up.

### *Content*

Spoken input varies widely: speaking in a character's voice, describing what they do, describing one's character's entrance or exist, describing events, 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 a 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.

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 you like that it uniquely offers.

Fictional time does move along, at least on the average. Have the characters do stuff as they talk, based on the situation, in an unhurried way. They might go somewhere or stay put, and time may pass quickly or slowly. "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 ahead to a specific time.

### *Card content: loose use!*

At any time except during Angel or Morning play, anyone may move the current top card of the deck to any quadrant of the drawer's choice. If a quadrant is empty, move it there, still face-up. If the quadrants are all occupied, then the card in one of them goes into the possession of that player and the card being moved goes there. The new top card of the deck is now turned over in place to reveal its content.

After a little while, there will be 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 aren't required to incorporate a given Life 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.

Be easy with story transitions, character movement into new locations, and 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. Hassles, yes. Characters may disagree, insult one another, and even lose their tempers without lasting social crisis, but 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. Especially avoid the temptation to throw fellow players a hot-potato such as "And my character's your cousin!" or similar. The Angel cards allow room for such content in a more specific and useful context, so leave it off until one has appeared.

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.

Conversely, any time you'd like, 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. Draw one or two slips to help your initial concept. A religion statement isn't required for new characters but you may add one if you like. You may now play either or both of your characters, or choose not to play one again, as you like.

### *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 complain about the characters not cooperating. Flash back to the characters' first birthdays and interview their parents.

Do it when it strikes you, keep it short, enjoy the freakiness and whatever insights arise, and then 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 discarded into the box. 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 hassle-free, fully "restful." That stipulation remains until someone bumps the Morning off the top of the deck to a quadrant and reveals a new card. Once in a quadrant, a Morning provides no content.

### *Angels*

When an Angel card is revealed, then the fiction gets a bit scary. One player is obliged within short order to view any character of any other player through the crosshairs: death makes itself known to that person as intimations of mortality. The player of the targeted character places the relevant sheet

*How* this occurs in the fiction is free to vary greatly:

- Literally the person's 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

Whoever you're targeting, which may include the Ophian character, lead the crisis for that 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. Make the details as personal for yourself as possible.

*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 as well as to the named Angel. If you can see it or feel it for any of the characters at that moment, then do it. If you can't, then don't force it.

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.

Play continues either to develop the situation for that character or to begin equally crosshairs-like situations for others. Use the specific Angel for nuances of the situation(s), consulting the Ophian player for details. The other four visible cards may be used for content as usual, but no further card drawing is permitted until the Angel resolution is finished.

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 to show how this character processes this issue.

Angel play is a golden opportunity for surrealistic content if anyone wants. Personally, I envision a comic illustrated primarily in the style of Alison Bechdel or Jason Lutes, now shifting into a much more textured and naturalistic 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 ultimately resolved numerically. Each has a score of 7 (Samiel, Uriel), 14 (Gabriel, Barachiel), 21 (Suriel, Raphael), or 28 (Michael), which is added to the score of the previously-revealed angel for a final value. Thus the lowest possible value is 7, if Samiel or Uriel is the first Angel card to be revealed, and the highest possible value is 49, if Michael is combined with either Suriel or Raphael.

Every player has points based on the number cards he or she has collected so far, scored in Fibonacci sequence, such that each successive score is the sum of the previous two:

<b>Total cards</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>Score</b>	1	2	3	5	8	13	21	34	55

This value now applies to a targeted character owned by that player. If a player has more than one character at risk in this way, he or she may allot cards to one or both. The Ophian player also counts his or her starting Ophian card, which is never discarded. Anyone may provide his or her cards to someone else, but it must be all the cards, nor can these cards be passed to a third person. The Ophian card cannot be given to another player.

When all the cards have landed where they're going to go, compare the Fibonacci value of each at-risk character to the Angel's value. If a character's value exceeds the angel's, then that character's owner describes how they successfully 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, including lethal outcomes for anyone except the Ophian character.

After all the targeted characters have been played through these experiences, the Ophian player concludes the Angel resolution by moving the Angel card from the top of the deck to his or her play-space and discarding the Angel card which was there, if any, to the box. All of the players' cards are also discarded to the box. Flip the top card of the deck face-up and continue play, drawing at will as usual.

### *Understanding the transitions*

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

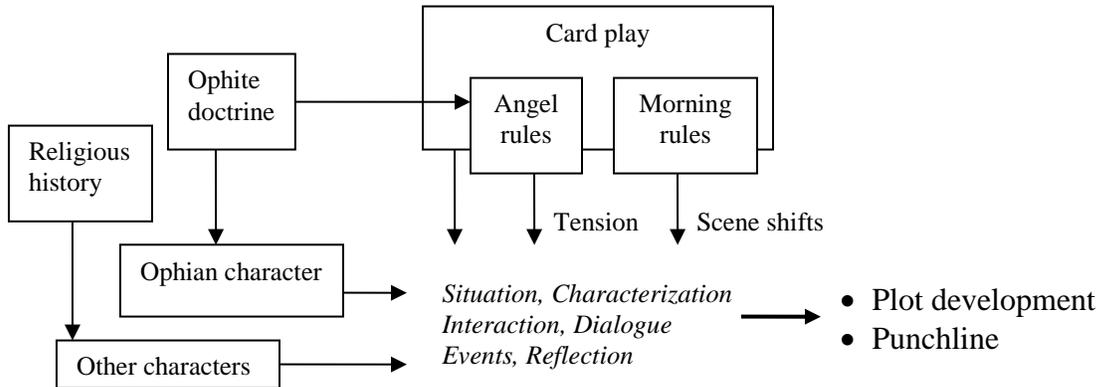
- Minor shifts in location, time, and attention are applied when and if anyone says they do, without negotiation or revision, and with no required coordination with card play or content.
- A formal and specific shift in time and probably location is mandated by Morning cards, which also clear the quadrants; those cards are collected by whoever revealed the Morning card.
- 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 55 cards including seven angels without hitting a satisfying endpoint in the terms described above.

## Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the playtesters so far: James Brown, E. James Heil, Gregor Hutton, Tod Olson, Julie Stauffer, Maura Byrne, Meg Baker, Vincent Baker, Emily Care Boss, and Epediah Ravachol.

## Influences, references, and thoughts

### Genre

Comics are the main thing. The outstanding and spot-on influences are *Box Office Poison*, *Hate*, *Beg the Question*, *Cheap Thrills*, *Wendel*, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, *Eyebeams*, *Through the Habitrails*, and the *Alec* collection, especially *The King Canute Crowd* and *Graffiti Kitchen*. You can find this approach all the way back in the early days of *Doonesbury*. More literally autobiographical but similar are *Colin Upton’s Big Thing*, *Persepolis*, *It’s a Good Life if You Don’t Weaken*, *Maus*, *Dori Stories*, *Life of the Party*, *Cancer Vixen*, and *David Chelsea in Love*, all of which can be traced back to *American Splendor*.

I’m not including *Stuck Rubber Baby*, *Fun Home*, or any series with more naturalistic techniques and a stricter 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 high points and, stylistically, films directed by Robert Altman.

### Fiction

The only novel 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 shoe-horning astrology into everything.

### Games

*Nicotine Girls*, *Dirty Secrets*, and *Ribbon Drive* all use conversational, personal techniques that influenced this design. Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World* introduced the useful phrase "look at him through the crosshairs." Frederik J. Jensen's *Montsegur 1244* is the only historical Gnostic game; plenty of pop and occult Gnostic content is found in *Nobilis*, *Kult*, and a ton of stuff by Ken Hite.

### Math

See Nicolai Vorobiev, *Fibonacci Numbers*, for the 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."

### 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 is scarily consistent across what are supposed to be essential 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.

# THE OPHIAN PLAYER'S PAMPHLET

## *Playing the Ophian*

... isn't supposed to be or feel weird. He or she is a young adult with a given regional and ethnic background just like everyone else. The following material is for you to soak in as the foundation for what the character doesn't reflect upon.

## *History (briefly)*

Christianity, and its diverse preceding contributors, spread rapidly all around the eastern Mediterranean and throughout Africa, Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Persia, with no guiding institution. Remnants of these ancient sects or groups referencing them maintained independence in scattered locations. Here, I'm making one up, 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 is simple: they're serpent-worshippers, "Naassene" in heresiological terms. It's not necessarily historically continuous with those described by Origen, but it's no less intolerable. After the invention and characterization of Satan over the next few centuries, it would have become anathema to the entire spectrum of Abrahamic religious power, and in my fictional history, it went entirely underground for over fifteen hundred years of covert existence.

## *Doctrine*

It begins with the Gnostic belief that God is a malevolent usurper called Ialdabaoth, who is neither the creator of the cosmos nor even slightly sane. He is a malevolent being whose only accomplishment was to inflict existence with death in all its forms, desiring to keep humanity miserable, dying, and ignorant.

The Bible as a text is considered to be badly compromised. They consider the scattered JE portions of the Pentateuch and *The Gospel According to John* to be valid, but of course only they read them "right." The Johannine epistles are regarded with loathing.

In this reading of Genesis, Ophis, the serpent, is the source of insight and guidance for humanity in the task of living in the world in defiance of Ialdabaoth. In this reading of the Gospel, the Christos is considered to have won. From now on he will gather *all* the souls of the dead, safe from the usurper. The Gospel is a victory story, as humanity has indeed been freed from the bondage of death, misery, and oppression if only people would understand it. They don't *have* to live in fear and ignorance.

## *The Enemy*

Ialdabaoth's power is felt through his archons, or archangels. Like him, they are insane. Each embodies an aspect of death as experienced by humanity, fueling all forms of deception and oppression. The deluded mainstream of Abrahamic faith, of course, spins this content to sound pretty.

	<b>Essence</b>	<b>Nuances</b>	<b>Buzzwords</b>	<b>Associated names</b>
<b>Michael</b> Who is Like God	Pure death	No explanation, no point, nothing	courage, strength, truth, success, faith	
<b>Suriel</b> God's Command	Murder, as means or as end	Pride, arrogance, ill-will	justice, fairness, harmony	<i>Raguel</i>
<b>Raphael</b> God's Healing	Intellectual submission	Rationalization, distraction	healing, communication, knowledge, vision	
<b>Gabriel</b>	Faithful submission	Blind faith as virtue, God's will	protection, intuition, clarity, discipline	

Man of God				
<b>Barachiel</b> Blessing of God	Suffering	Injustice, pain, grief, misfortune	blessing, guardianship, prayer, sorrows, mercy	<i>Zadkiel, Salaphiel</i> <i>Thauthabaoth</i>
<b>Samael</b> Severity of God	Killing for a cause	Ostensible purpose, soullessness	stamina, victory, courage, leadership, passion	<i>Entaoth</i>
<b>Uriel</b> Fire of God	Extravagant destruction	Fire, madness, psychosis	peace, wisdom, light, understanding, change, hope	<i>Ramiel, Onoel,</i> <i>Thartharaoth</i>

They are everywhere. They are inadvertently worshipped with almost every act, every word, and every breath of most people. You can't fight an angel. You defy them, and confirm their defeat by Christos, by withstanding the suffering, by understanding its origins and by refusing to submit to deceptions.

According to this sect, the world continues to suffer under the archons' boot only because people did not understand the word of Christos. Therefore the role of Ophis is venerated: keeping his knowledge alive, and when possible, bringing it to those who cannot yet see it.

### *Creed*

Rather than the Cathar-style rejection of material reality, this sect serves ordinary people in their lives and there is no regard for "escaping" the world. What you do and think *in* the world does matter. Although born to slavery, ignorance, deception, and death, we may still live well, work toward ends we value, and find love. Steadfastness (*qudna*) is a core precept, enduring what the veil of tears may throw at you: that is, literally, the presence of Christos. Be wise to the archangels' nature and influences, and live to frustrate them.

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

- Lies are evil
  - Beware others' lies
  - Be truthful to yourself
  - Be truthful to others (but see *taqiyya* below)
  - Keep the faith alive
- Stay hidden from other faiths (see *taqiyya* below)
  - Build families through love, work, and truth
  - Help others in their suffering and deception

As with all religious social instruction, observant people manage to meet about half these expectations about half the time. Also, typically, its creed is more socially conservative than its doctrine. The part about truth-above-all is similar to modern Jehovah's Witness, in that it contributes to anti-intellectualism and insularity as much as to skepticism or questioning establishmentarianism.

### *Practice*

They also practice *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. If you ask what religion they practice, they'll say "Catholic" and name whatever church they attend.

They attend and outwardly conform to ordinary church practice, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Syriac Catholic based on location. In private, they also retro-convert whatever they did there, on a weekly and holiday basis, to focus on Ophis, Gnosis, and the details of their creed.

This would seem hypocritical given the stuff about not lying, but it ties into their self-view regarding other people: that they are ultimately serving everyone's good by defying the angels and keeping the faith alive. It's generally accepted that others, doctrinally confused as they may be, aren't bad people and in many cases do defy the angels without knowing it. After all, their souls are saved already too. Therefore liking, accepting, and helping others outside of the faith, without talking about it at all, is a key feature.

### *Back to the character*

Your Ophian knows this stuff through habit, not reflection, and most likely observes the personal rites spottily, like many first-year college students. He or she is basically a nice person who's picked up on the nicer, non-technical aspects of the faith and thinks of them as family values.

Therefore play isn't supposed to be a conflict about "will my friends find out" or "they must never know." The Ophite content establishes where he or she is coming from, at a deep, family-based, personal level that doesn't concern itself with spoken belief or analysis.

## THE OPHIAN HERESY

### About Gnostics and Ophites

The literature on this topic is 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-19<sup>th</sup> 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, 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.

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 and a usurper, 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 Pneuma, 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, considered to be incorruptible light, and 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*

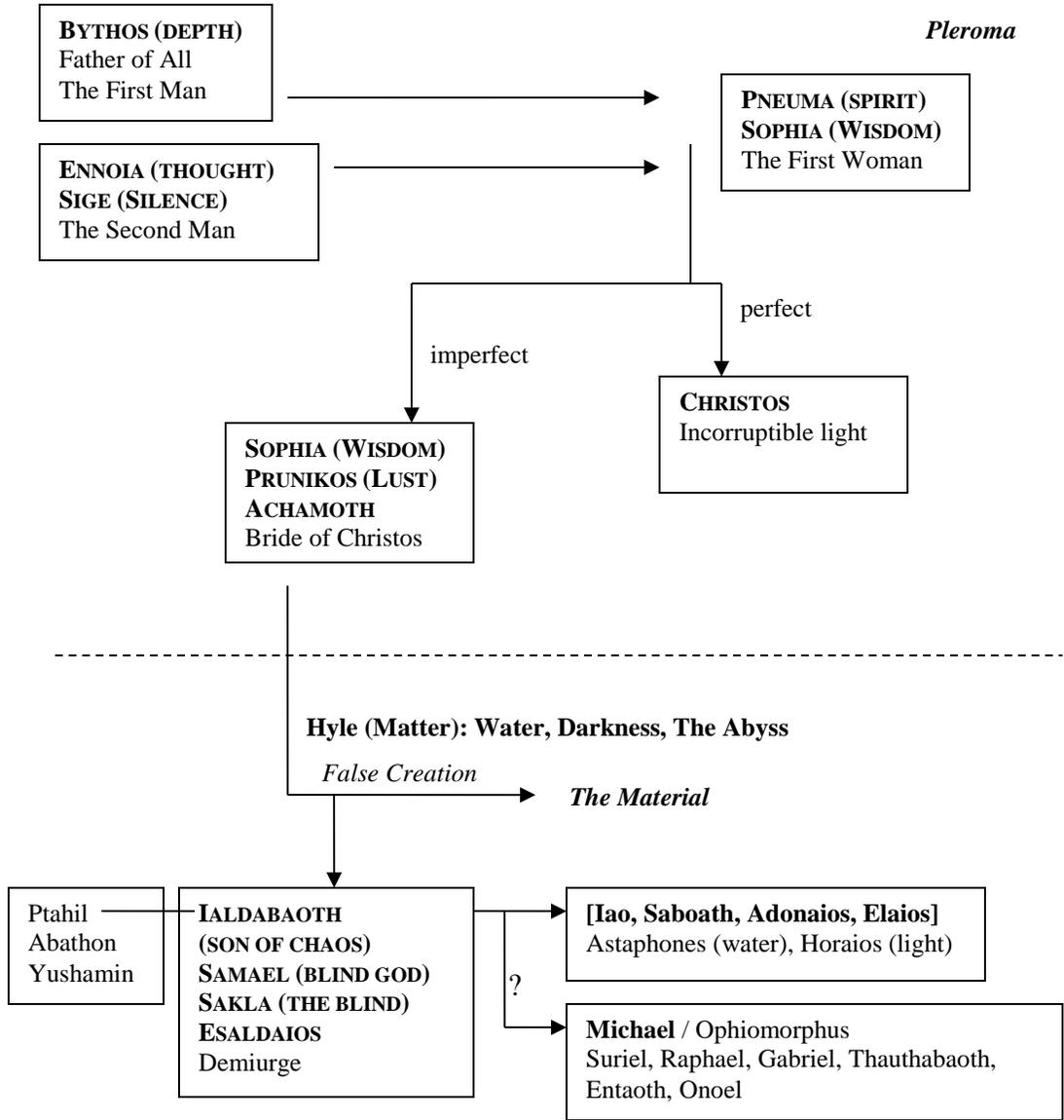
As time goes by, Sophia Achamoth makes another bid to correct or rein in her unruly accidental creation, going so high as to appeal to Pneuma, who enlists the permission of Bythos and helps out. Sophia Achamoth then gets together with her brother the Christos, who's been doing basically nothing all this 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."



**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

