

How to Succeed in Religion

A sketch by Brantley Thompson Elkins

With accidental inspiration from a certain professor

Jerusalem, Anno Urbis Conditae 789, Galactic Year 904-12

It was the worst posting they'd ever had, here in the prefecture called Judea. These people who called themselves Hebrews hated the Romans, but they seemed to hate each other even more. They couldn't even agree on who *was* a Hebrew; the Temple priesthood here was always denouncing the Samaritans, and it didn't help that the prefect's cavalry, *Ala I Sebastenorum*, was made up of Samaritan mercenaries.

Crispus Fortunatus at once envied and despised the cavalry troops, who were stationed at Caesarea on the coast. He envied them because at Caesarea, there were such diversions as theatrical productions, sports competitions and public baths. He despised them because such pleasures were wasted on the Samaritans, who were every bit as ascetic as the Hebrews of Jerusalem. Like them they advocated stoning women who lay with men outside of marriage.

Of course, there were loose women everywhere, even here, but it was risky business to seek them out – even for an officer, and he was a mere *milite* of the *Cohors Prima Italica Civium Romanorum*, although he had recently begun training as a smith. That would earn him Immune status – freeing him from ordinary military duties – and higher pay. But for the present, he wasn't immune to routine duties like shopping for the cohort at the sheep market. It was an unpleasant duty; the sheep market stank and the people also stank – no public baths! Worst of all, there was a band of zealots preaching.

Something about the “New Kingdom;” he'd been here long enough to pick up basic Aramaic. They must be followers of Yeshua, the zealot crucified by Pilate at the behest of the Priesthood. They claimed he had risen from the grave, although nobody seemed to have witnessed this except for his acolytes. Yeshua had been nothing but trouble for the Romans, getting them involved in petty local disputes, and in death he seemed to be causing even more trouble.

Crispus tried to ignore the zealots as he bargained for fresh lamb – he'd come prepared with the same kind of coins the Hebrews used to pay taxes, without the Emperor's image. But one of the bearded zealots accosted him.

“You should be seeking the Lamb of God,” the zealot said. “Even Gentiles like yourself can find salvation.”

Crispus rolled his eyes, but when he unrolled them he noticed that the zealot was accompanied by a comely maiden. Or perhaps not a maiden; she seemed a bit too old and a bit too worldly wise...

“You should not look at me so,” the woman said. “I am consecrated to the Lord.”

Yet she smiled. Hebrew women never smiled.

Fearful that it might not go well for her if the zealot noticed, Crispus decided to humor him.

“And what might I have to do, to merit your salvation?”

“Accept Yeshua as your savior. Follow his teachings. Observe the Law, even as He did.”

Crispus had heard of the Hebrew Law. It was said to number more than 600 commandments that had to do with everything from not eating certain foods and not wearing certain garments, to abstaining from haircuts and observing a long list of holy days and ceremonies, and arcane matters relating to sacrifices at the Temple.

“You must also be circumcised,” the zealot.

Crispus’ cock had risen at the sight of the woman and her smile, but wilted in an instant.

“Crazy!” he shouted. “You’re crazy! Be off with you!”

“Come, Miriam,” the zealot told his companion. “He is blind, and will not see.”

“It is even so, Shimon.”

Ishtar, Galactic Year 901-11

It was the most successful business venture of all time, but the Scalantans who planned it never talked about it – the Asgardian and Ishtari protos, who carried it out, had sworn them to secrecy. The Galen themselves, who had conceived the idea, never told anybody – most especially the Velorians – until long after it had ceased to matter.

You have to understand the situation. The Galen had appeared on Earth as gods and goddesses. They were the objects of the first religious cults of the classical world of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. But things had gotten out of hand; they were afraid that Earthmen had become too dependent on them. So they withdrew. Yet their cults continued. Superstition reigned. Feeling abandoned by their gods, Earthmen resorted to propitiatory rites – most just silly, some nasty – or even deadly.

None of it might have happened except for the Elders, who had fostered cults of magic and psychic powers. The Elders were latecomers to Earth, the Galen having first intervened tens of thousands of years earlier to bring the gift of fire to *homo sapiens*. They had withdrawn after that, but when they checked back during Neolithic times they took offense at the Elders’ meddling in the affairs of a race they saw in part as their own handiwork. So the Galen couldn’t resist meddling again themselves. Not with human nature – not at first. At first they offered only practical advice on things like agriculture and metalworking. The genetic engineering came later...

When they finally came to their senses – that was how they saw it – they became obsessed with the idea of authenticity. Earth needed an authentic civilization, an authentic mythology, something entirely of its own creation. But where to find it, and how to nurture it? The most promising source of authenticity, the Watchers told them, was in a small corner of the Roman Empire called Judea, which had never felt Galen influence, where a peculiar religion rejected all the ancient gods in favor of a single invisible god. The only

drawback was that the Hebrews, as they called themselves, didn't seem to have any interest in spreading their religion beyond their own nation.

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“What you seem to have in mind requires what we call a business model,” said Harbusum

Harbusum was the planetary Factor of the Scalantrans, who in those days were already trading with the worlds of the Protos – humans with enhanced powers like the Ishtari and Olympians and Asgardians. Some would later become Surrogates in the Seeding programs that peopled sundry worlds with ordinary people from sundry Terran cultures, but that was all in the future.

“Business model?” asked Vodinaz. An Asgardian Proto who served as one of the Watchers for Earth, he had been summoned to Ishtar in connection with this latest scheme of the Galen. It was an imposition, and yet a welcome respite from his service in the Roman Empire – in the guise of a common laborer, lest he inspire further abuses like those of the northern European cult that had arisen in his name.

“The principles of marketing are the same, whether for goods or ideas,” Harbusum explained. “It is essential to have an organization with a clear sense of mission and a clear sense of strategy. There must be a table of organization, a hierarchy of leaders in which those at all levels understand their roles in working for the common goal. A dependable source of funding is also necessary.”

“These Hebrews have a practice called tithing. But that is to support the temple, of which they have only one. Other religions have temples aplenty, but the funding for them is as haphazard as the cults they serve.”

“The cults you admit to having created,” Harbusum pointed out,

“Not exactly what we had in mind. Garbled memories of our activities combined with those of sundry human kings and warriors and occasional innovators. But what can one expect of such short-lived beings? We should have left them alone after giving them a fair start, regardless of the Elders – who, at least, have had the sense to remove their Diaboli, just as we have removed our Protos. At least we *think* they have. We must yet have a reckoning with the Elders, but not on Earth. Our goal there is to remove all traces of our interference.”

“And you think this religion of a single god could do it?”

“Not in its present form. But Judea is a veritable garden of prophets; at the death of their King Herod, no fewer than three claimed to be their *moshiach*, their anointed redeemer; who knows what others of the same sort may have arisen since then?”

“We have nothing to do with that,” the Grand Factor reminded him. “Our role is to provide business advice. If you can provide us with sufficient information on the organizational structures of the established cults, we can undertake to provide a superior model.”

Jerusalem, AUC 786-9, Galactic Year 904-9 to 904-11

“Don't use any of your natural gifts,” Vodinaz had warned her. “You are to think, feel and behave like one of them. You will not read minds, you will not project thoughts, you will not work miracles. You

have been deeptaught the Aramaic language. You must speak that language, and think what can be thought in that language, in all your interactions with the Hebrews. You have been given to understand the facial expressions and body language common among them. Always look, always listen.”

“I understand,” she had responded – in Aramaic – as if Vodinaz were incapable of reading her mind.

“You will play your role by eye and by ear,” Vodinaz continued. “That is absolutely essential. You have memorized the model in all its details, but that is not enough. Only by becoming what you seem to be can you sense when and how to begin carrying out your mission. All that you say and do must seem to come as naturally as it would from a native of the time and place you will enter, and thus appear natural to the subject and his followers. You will choose an identity – not just a name, but a persona.”

“It shall be done,” she had promised in Aramaic.



And so it had been. She was now Miriam. She did not even think of her born name. She had attached herself to Yeshua because his obvious charisma was a key element in the business model Harbusum had developed – there were other preachers in the land of the Hebrews, but none with such eloquence and seeming innocence. Yet charisma was a fleeting thing; it had to be to become infused in a movement, to become an *idea*, with the collective will and organization to spread it.

She had been the obvious choice for the mission. The apostles were too well known, their families too well known; in any case it would have violated the ground rules to have replaced one of them. But for a sinful woman of obscure origin, seemingly possessed by demons, to seek the help of a preacher with a reputation for casting out demons – that didn’t alter the order of things. Neither did anointing his feet, and becoming the most devoted of his women followers. She knew the apostles were jealous of her. She knew that they had suspected her of being more than a friend to Yeshua. As long as that was *all* they suspected, it didn’t matter.

Yeshua was still Yeshua, his words were still his words, his apostles still his apostles. Their faith was kept pure. Things had played out the way they would have if she had never appeared on the scene. Until the

arrest of Yeshua and his conviction and execution. Miriam had never anticipated that, of course, although she should have – there had been executions of rebel claimants to the throne after the death of Herod the Great. But then, she wasn't really surprised, given that Yeshua had made himself such a thorn in the side of the Hebrew and Roman authorities alike. He seemed to be preaching revolution, and they didn't have any tolerance for that sort of thing.

Miriam hadn't witnessed his arrest of the Garden of Gethsemane, she heard later that Shimon Kefa had started to draw his sword in defense of Yeshua, then thought better of it. Or just turned coward, for he denied even knowing the prophet after he was brought in. She had thought it strange that the apostles were armed in the first place; that was an invitation to trouble, for violent resistance would have brought down swift and sure retribution.

Shimon had been Yeshua's most trusted disciple, and yet he had failed in the end. Judas' part she could understand; she had never liked his looks anyway. Not that it mattered; it was all over, her mission a failure, there wasn't any point to sticking around. And yet something impelled her to play her part to the end, even to the ugly spectacle of the Crucifixion. Yeshua died with dignity, she thought – but death was death. That was an end to it.

It was there that the idea hit her. She knew she was going beyond her mandate from Vodinaz; but as she saw it, she could salvage the mission after all, rather than finding some other prophet and starting from scratch – and there was no time for consultation. After all, she told herself, she wasn't *really* changing anything. Yeshua would still be Yeshua, his followers still his followers, It wouldn't matter, she decided, as long as they believed her account of the empty tomb, and that the reappearance of Yeshua was a divine miracle as opposed to a matter of alien healing powers. Best of all, Yeshua himself would believe it. The Crucifixion was a stroke of luck, she rationalized, and the Resurrection would be a brilliant improvisation.

And so it came to pass, and Miriam made the most of it as a chance to implement the Scalantans' business model.

"This is surely a great miracle, a sign of divine favor like none other in all time," she suggested to Yeshua in private. "It must be taught to all nations, not only the Hebrews, and all your teachings likewise." And lo, Yeshua made it a commandment. When it came time for the prophet to take his leave, he was certain that he would return within the lifetimes of his disciples to see the fruits of his handiwork. When she arranged for the pickup, after belatedly informing Vodinaz of her improvisation, he orchestrated it so skillfully that Yeshua himself must have been convinced that he was ascending to Heaven.

Vodinaz had not been pleased, and he might have terminated the mission then and there. But he too was reluctant to have to start all over again, to find another prophet. Miriam assured him that she had not altered any of Yeshua's teachings, and that he had interpreted his resurrection according to his own belief system. "His faith, even now, has been kept pure," she insisted. But how to deal with him offworld would now be Vodinaz' problem – her problem was with those left behind. It was now a matter of the business model.

“There should be twelve of you,” she advised Shimon shortly afterwards. “It was he who ordained this, just as he ordained you to lead his church. You should be governed by his ordination.” And it came to pass that Shimon assembled more than 100 disciples, and that they chose Matthias as the twelfth apostle to replace Judas.

But teaching all nations called for organization, it called for planning, it called for communication. So she began dropping hints, mostly to Shimon, and in private. “Those of you who are lettered, they should be the overseers and the elders and the servants of new churches,” she advised. “They should write to one another and keep the ties of brotherhood among them.”

Only Shimon was preoccupied with the affairs of the original church in Jerusalem, which was beset by the authorities. Stephanos, one of seven *episkopoi* he had appointed to lead the first synagogue of Greek-speaking Jews to accept Yeshua as the *moshiach*, was hailed before the Sanhedrin on charges of blasphemy for preaching reform of the torah and prophesying the destruction of the Temple.

Before the Sanhedrin could even reach its verdict, a mob led by a man named Saul from Tarsus set upon Stephen and stoned him to death. It was the Greek-speaking Hebrews like Saul, some returned from distant places like North Africa and Asia and even Rome, and already accommodated by synagogues of their own, who were most hostile towards the followers of Yeshua. The synagogue founded by Stephanos had relocated to Syria.

Hebrew converts, too, had fled the city for a time, after the Romans had refused to intervene against roaming attackers. “None of our business,” their centurion told them bluntly. And even after the situation had calmed down in Jerusalem, Shimon seemed to have lost interest in founding other Greek-speaking synagogues beyond Judea or teaching all nations. Moreover, he still insisted that any Gentile converts must submit to circumcision and follow strict Mosaic law.

For Miriam, this was a distraction. The houses of prayer and assembly for those who spoke Hebrew – synagogue was a Greek term – were flourishing, their membership upwards of 5,000. She could appreciate a developing sense of community in the Jerusalem church, whose members gave their all for one another. The elders at the houses had begun electing the own overseers; the seeds of the business model were taking root, the process was becoming self-sustaining. But only in Judea, under Shimon’s leadership, where those who believed in Yeshua spoke Hebrew and were observant of Hebrew law and custom. The church wasn’t reaching out to the Greeks or the Romans; it was still only a local cult.

Jerusalem, AUC 790, Galactic Year 904-12

“*Raka!*” Miriam heard a man shouting one morning when she came to Shimon’s house to consult with him about the work of the *ahmati* – servants of the Lord, who assisted the overseers and elders in the everyday work of the church, and succored those in need.

Women were suffered to serve in that capacity, although not as overseers or elders, and Shimon had admitted her to the service. But who could be here shouting at the apostle? She had never heard the word used before, and it took her a moment to remember that it meant “idiot.”

She paused at Shimon's door without entering. She recognized the voice of Yakob, the half-brother of Yeshua, reproving the rude visitor, whose voice she was sure she had never heard before. But the man, whoever he might be, was in no mood to accept reproof.

"Yeshua told us of other sheep that are not of this fold," the man was saying to Shimon and Yakob – his voice earnest, but no longer shouting. "We must shepherd the Greeks and the Romans and all the other Gentiles as well as the Hebrews, and yet you would let them wander without knowledge of our Lord and the salvation He bought for us by His suffering on the Cross."

"We have never denied fellowship to the Gentiles," Shimon protested, apparently trying to remain calm but clearly seething within.

"Only if they obey a Law that the Lord never meant for them. Our Lord has appeared to me, and I can speak only as He speaks."

"We have heard tell of you, but we know you not," interposed Yakob. "It is said that you once tormented our people in Syria. Yet now you claim to speak for our Lord, Whom you have never met."

"I met Him on the road to Damascus," the man said. "He commanded me to speak in His name, and to bring His word to all nations."

"Where were you the night of our Lord's agony?" Shimon said, his voice now angry. "Where were you when I drew my sword in His defense? Where were you when He suffered on the Cross?"

"I have never denied my sins, even the stoning of Stephanos and the persecution of his church."

"Him?" asked Yakob.

"The very one, then calling himself Saul but now Paul, who drove those of us who speak Greek out of Judea, and now claims to lead them. I had wished to spare you this, brother, knowing of your regard for Stephanos."

"I am no longer Saul. I have repented and pledged my service to the Lord."

"By favoring Gentiles who have not the Law? Go now, and let this be the last we see of you."

"You will be found wanting in His eyes," Paul said, and stormed out the door, elbowing his way past Miriam.

"I should have cut his head off," Shimon muttered. "Or at least his ear."

"What was that all about?" Miriam asked, feigning not to have heard what had gone before.

"He postures as one of us, but he wants us all to be like Greeks," Shimon complained. And then they got down to the business of tithing for the support of widows and other good works.

That was all very well, it was part of the plan. But Miriam knew that it wasn't enough. And then, a few days later, Shimon scared off the legionary at the market with his insistence on circumcision. Chances were that the legionary wasn't a potential convert in any case, but what if he had been?

This is bad for business, bad all around, she thought,

Her next thought was that she would have to find this Paul, and teach him the business model, even if it meant leaving Shimon.

It meant she would have to go rogue. So be it.

Antioch, AUC 794, Galactic Year 905-4

Miriam was pleased with herself and with the mission.

There had already been a thriving Hebrew community here in Antioch, and it had proven to be a rich source of converts. But Paul had founded other churches in neighboring cities, admitting Gentiles as well as Hebrews, and without imposing Mosaic law on them. That was good. But it still wasn't enough.

Communication was essential to the business model; Shimon hadn't understood that, but Paul did – with a little encouragement on her part. He began writing letters to the Church in Jerusalem, and to the other churches in Syria. Miriam made multiple copies, sensing that they would become important. She couldn't understand half of what Paul was saying about matters like baptism and the eucharist, and since he hadn't actually ever met Yeshua except in his supposed vision, she knew he had to be making it all up. Did he believe any of it himself?

It didn't matter; in his sermons and in his letters, he *seemed* to believe – and that was enough. It was another essential element in the business plan. Miriam made sure that the letters were widely circulated, and encouraged others in the various congregations to correspond with one another. Across the leagues, they strengthened each other's faith, felt themselves as part of a divine mission, as the very instruments of Yeshua.

People here on Earth didn't know about viral ideas, what some of their descendents millennia hence would call memes. But the infection was spreading; there were seven churches in Asia and more in Greece. It was all thanks to the growing sense of community, something quite lacking in the pagan religions, which had become a matter of temples and rituals only.

"You've got to make people believe you've got a good thing going," Harbusum had advised her. "There has to be a sense of *momentum*. There has to be a sense of salesmanship, not only in the enterprise itself but in the everyday details of advertising and marketing."

She could see it now. Even with the dispute over Hebrew law with the Church in Jerusalem still unresolved, Paul was adopting Greek terminology – episkopoi for the overseers, presbyteroi for the elders and diakonoi for the servants. He had even begun calling the new converts Christians, after Christos – the closest Greek came to *moshiach*. He and Barnabas, a defector from Jerusalem, had taken it on themselves to appoint the elders for the new churches in Syria and beyond, and they naturally looked to them rather than Shimon for leadership.

Even as overseer of the church in Jerusalem, Shimon was powerless to interfere. Eventually, he gave in – even spreading a story that he himself had converted a centurion named Cornelius in order to be seen as going with the flow. He agreed to take the name Petros, Greek equivalent of Kefa proposed by Paul and the new Christians, Gentiles and Hebrews alike, and left Jerusalem to oversee the church at Antioch after Paul pressed onwards into the heart of the Roman Empire.

Miriam, sensing that her work was done, headed for Caesarea for some much needed relaxation. By a stroke of luck, she encountered Crispus there. He had advanced his fortunes and achieved Immune status as

armorer for his unit. Just now, he told her, he was in town to visit the fleshpots. She could tell he was making fun of her, assuming that as a Christian she'd been shocked at such vulgar talk. So she decided to shock *him*.

"Why not try out *my* flesh?" she teased him.

The legionary's jaw fairly dropped. He began to hem and haw.

"I'm done with the Christians," she interrupted. "They don't know how to appreciate women. They want us to do all the work and keep silent in councils."

Which was true. Paul, especially, didn't want to admit that he'd gotten any ideas, or any help, from a mere woman – and a supposedly fallen woman at that.

"I think I could appreciate you," Crispus said with a look of lust in his eyes. He didn't know that she could see his manhood rise to the occasion. She remembered what had unmanned him the first time they had met, stepped forward and whispered in his ear.

"I don't want you to circumcise your cock. I just want your cock."

They retired to his room at a local inn, where she soon discovered that he not only knew what to do with his cock but how to pleasure a woman in every way – he told her afterwards that he had read up on that in the poetry of a man named Ovid, and practiced with other women back in Rome.

Whatever. All she knew that first time was that he truly knew his way around a woman's body: how to kiss her deeply, fondle her breasts, tease her nipples with his fingers and his teeth, even lick and nibble between her legs – no Hebrew man had ever done that, she was certain! She moaned and whimpered with delight, but only when he knew she was really wet and really ready did he plunge his cock into her and ride her like a man possessed by demons. She came, and then he came, crying out her name as he shot into her.

It wasn't her real name, of course, but it was the thought that counted. She appreciated that, and when she told him she wanted to ride him, his eyes fairly lit up – eyes that drank in her beauty as she invited him to lie on his back, then raised herself over him and impaled herself on a cock quickly risen from the little death. What must he be thinking, she wondered, at the sight of her taut belly, her smoothly muscled arms, breasts that didn't sag a single *digitus* and must feel inhumanly springy as he squeezed them harder and harder. And how must he feel as she tightened and then loosened her grip on his cock at a faster and faster rhythm? She felt him come, and she came in response, and shouted *his* name.

He looked up at her in wonder.

"You must be Venus herself, come to Earth," he said.

It was close to the truth, but she couldn't tell him that.

"Perhaps she has favored me," she said. "And led me to favor you."

They spent a week there, seeing the sights by day and making love by night. But he was due back in Judea, to practice his craft for the *Cohors Prima Italica Civium Romanorum*. He begged her to come with him, but she demurred.

"They know me there," she reminded him. "And now I am a truly fallen woman. My punishment would be severe."

A lie. Stones couldn't hurt her. But if the Hebrews or the Christians found that out... it could undo all her work.

Crispus accepted her lie, but promised to return to Caesarea the first chance he got.

"I might not be here," she said. "I've been thinking of moving to Alexandria. I want to be lettered, perhaps work in the library there."

He looked sad. But he was accepting.

"Then I shall remember you all the days of my life," he said

* * *

Vodinaz was furious with her when she resumed contact after remaining silent for years. But he had to admit that she had gotten the job done.

"Things didn't work out exactly as I expected," Miriam told him, after returning to the ship.

"They never do," Vodinaz said. "Even for us."

"This man Paul is seriously warped," she went on. "Yeshua preached a gospel of love, but his new gospel is all about sin and depravity."

"Still, he is undoing the legacy of our own cults, with all his sermons and letters – and letters are such an important element of the model – about the Earthmen having exchanged the glory of his immortal God for images made to look like mortal men and women."

"He would turn all the pagan gods into demons."

"Which, quite by accident, should serve as a check against further activity there by the Elders. Any Diaboli that remain will have a hard time of it."

"We might have a hard time of it ourselves, if the Elders choose to take the war directly to us, rather than working through proxies."

"All the more reason not to be distracted by affairs on what is, after all, a backwater planet."

But she still remembered Crispus. She was afraid there would be no place for men like him on the kind of world Earth – his part of it, anyway – was going to become.