“More Life”: The Jacob Cycle and the Book of Mormon as transformation in *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*

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At the risk of being overly sentimental, I felt that this quote was fitting:

> *The disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.*
> *Bye now.*
> *You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.*
> *And I bless you: More Life.*
> *The great work begins.*
> *(Kushner 290; Epilogue)*

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Introduction

Throughout his 1993 play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,* Tony Kushner retells core scriptures and theologies from Jewish and Latter Day Saints (LDS) doctrines through the lens of the queer American experience in the 1980s. Both the Mormon Church's *Book of Mormon* and Kushner's play ask for continuing transformation, going beyond the texts of Genesis on which they both rely. Kushner rewrites the discovery of *The Book of Mormon*, the founding angelic encounter that begins this new American religion, and his play asks audiences to push forward from cultural stagnation just as the LDS church requires forward progress of its members.

The forebodingness of the play's commentary on the rejection and demonization of queer Americans by the religious and political right acts in tandem with scholar Yair Lipschitz's analysis of main character Prior, a gay man with AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), as the embodiment of Jacob's transformation into Israel in his article "The Jacob Cycle in Angels in America: Re-Performing Scripture Queerly." This essay intends to build off of Lipschitz's analysis using the concept of continuing theophany, or ongoing revelation from the divine, a core concept of LDS doctrine shown in the play through Prior's interactions with the Angel who acts in the role of a prophet (Maffley-Kipp).

Where my argument diverges from existing scholarship is in its insistence on taking both the Mormon and Hebrew Bible's theological framework, and the play's queer themes with equal seriousness. While Kushner acknowledges that the LDS Church was implicated in the repressive ideologies of the 1980s, ideologies that contributed to the marginalization and suffering of men with AIDS, he also incorporates Mormon cosmology and symbolism into the fabric of the play itself through the perspective of Joe, a closeted gay man who was raised Mormon. These

elements serve as a means of exploring how systems of belief can both constrain and potentially enable transformation within marginalized communities, emphasizing the inherently transformative nature of these ideologies as they juxtapose the rigid and stagnant nature of conservative religious communities in the 1980s.

At the center of this analysis is the opposition between stasis and progress. In the play, stasis is most explicitly articulated through the Angel's "Anti-Migratory Epistle," which calls for the cessation of human movement and change in order to restore divine order. However, Kushner also dramatizes stasis through his characters; Joe Pitt's internalized homophobia, Harper's psychological paralysis, the fictionalized portrayal of Roy Cohn as a closeted gay man with AIDS, Louis Ironson's moral and ideological uncertainty, and Belize's experience as a Black gay man navigating intersecting forms of marginalization. In each case, stasis reflects an adherence to the oppressive norms of American society, particularly those reinforced during the Reagan era. Stasis in this play is ultimately a form of oppression from those who would narrow the definition of what it means to be an American. Progress, then, is an insistence on opening that definition to those who have historically been excluded, be they queer, immigrants, religious minorities, or people of color.

I argue that continuing theophany functions as a central metaphor for ongoing progress in *Angels in America*, positioning transformation, spiritual, social, and political, as both necessary and inevitable. In resisting the Angel's demand for immobility, Prior ultimately affirms a vision of humanity defined not by stasis, but by change. Through this framework, Kushner redefines revelation itself: not as a fixed truth, but as a dynamic process that compels continual movement forward.

The Angel of America

Angels in America, divided into *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, traces the intersecting lives of two couples in 1980s America, a period marked by profound social upheaval and the devastating rise of the AIDS epidemic and compounded by the Ronald Reagan administration's indifference to the crisis. Joe Pitt, a closeted gay man raised within the conservative Latter-day Saint (LDS) tradition, struggles with his identity while navigating his wife Harper's Valium dependency and deteriorating mental health. In parallel, Prior Walter and Louis Ironson confront the emotional and physical toll of Prior's terminal HIV/AIDS diagnosis. The two couples are surrounded by a complex cast of characters, including Belize, a Black gay man who works as a nurse, a fictionalized Roy Cohen, who lives in denial of his queerness and diagnosis of HIV/AIDS, and Joe's devoutly Mormon mother, Hannah, who befriends Prior during his illness despite her homophobia.

From the moment of its inception, the creative process of *Angels in America* was interwoven with its subject matter. Kushner began writing *Angels in America* in the 1980s during the height of the AIDS crisis and under the backdrop of the Reagan administration. *Millenium Approaches* first premiered at the Eureka Theater in 1991 before later opening in London at the National Royal Theater in November 1992. Later that month, the play premiered in full at the Mark Taper Forum. In 1994, *Perestroika* received the award for best play at the Tonys (*The World Only Spins Forward*, 63). From the moment of its release, *Angels in America* garnered critical praise and attention for its bold and nuanced tackling of the minority experience in America. The 2013 revised edition, from which this essay works, includes changes to *Perestroika* that resulted from the play's 2010 revival with Signature Theatre (Kushner, x).

In *Millennium Approaches*, Prior begins experiencing prophetic visions---disembodied voices and descending feathers---that command him to "Prepare the Way" (1.7). These visions culminate in the play's final scene when a deteriorating Angel crashes through Prior's ceiling, proclaiming him a prophet. In *Perestroika*, the Angel returns, presenting Prior with a book of prophecy and advancing a radical cosmology: God has abandoned Heaven due to humanity's relentless progress and migration. According to the Angel, only human stasis, the cessation of movement, change, and development, can restore divine order and bring God back to heaven. Throughout both plays, Prior grapples not only with this apparent theological burden but also with his identity as a gay man living with AIDS in America. The Angel's first manifestation occurs as a disembodied voice: "A Voice: Look up, look up, / prepare the way / the infinite descent / A breath in air / floating down / Glory to…" *(Millennium Approaches*, 1.7.126-131).

Kushner's work does not shy away from the brutal realities of the epidemic. The play depicts both the physical suffering associated with AIDS lesions, pain, and bodily deterioration and the intense social stigma that framed it as a "gay disease." This stigmatization is reflected in contemporary responses to the crisis. Prior's suffering is thus twofold: he endures the ravages of illness while also facing abandonment, especially by Louis, who cannot cope with the weight of Prior's diagnosis, and condemnation from the religious right.

Although *Angels in America* is often remembered primarily as an AIDS play, Kushner situates the epidemic within a broader meditation on identity, religion, and marginalization in America. The play opens not with illness but with a funeral: that of Sarah Ironson, Louis' grandmother. Rabbi Isidor Chemelwitz's eulogy lays the groundwork for the thematic concerns of Kushner's work:

> So I do not know her and yet I know her. She was… not a person but a whole kind of person, the one who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania—and how we struggled, and how we fought for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up *here*, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted. Descendants of this immigrant woman, you do not grow up in America, you and your children and their children with the goyische names, you do not live in America, no such place exists. (1.1.19-29)

In this monologue, Chemelwitz challenges the notion of America as a cohesive "melting pot," instead describing it as a space where assimilation fails and difference persists. While rooted in the Jewish immigrant experience, his words extend to all marginalized groups. The assertion that "no such place exists" cracks holes in the idea of America as a unified national identity, foregrounding themes of fragmentation and exclusion that resonate throughout the play.

This broader framework is essential to understanding Kushner's treatment of the AIDS crisis. The epidemic did not occur in isolation but was shaped by existing structures of prejudice. Early media coverage illustrates this dynamic. A 1981 *New York Times* article, "RARE CANCER SEEN IN 41 HOMOSEXUALS," reflects the limited medical understanding of the time while reinforcing harmful assumptions. "The best evidence against contagion," Altman said, "is that no cases have been reported to date outside the homosexual community or in women." In a retrospective lens, the bias against gay men and the sexual expression of queer men is evident and reveals how scientific uncertainty became entangled with social bias, effectively isolating and stigmatizing gay men. This framing not only delayed an adequate public health response but also legitimized homophobia, allowing the crisis to be perceived as both contained and morally justified.

Kushner dramatizes this intersection of stigma and identity through characters such as Joe Pitt, whose internalized homophobia exemplifies the psychological toll of societal repression. In *Millennium Approaches* (2.8), Joe admits his sexuality to Harper without ever explicitly naming it, reflecting both his fear and the cultural unspeakability of queerness. His denial parallels the broader societal refusal to confront the AIDS crisis directly, illustrating how silence operates as a form of complicity.

The origins of *Angels in America* further illuminate its thematic concerns. In an oral history compiled by Isaac Butler and Dan Kois, Tony Kushner recounts how the play began as a poem inspired by the death of a man he knew who had AIDS:

> Around November of 1985, the first person that I knew personally died of AIDS. A dancer that I had a huge crush on, a very sweet man and very beautiful…And then, in November, he died. And I had this dream: Bill dying—I don't know if he was actually dying, but he was in his pajamas and sick on his bed—and the ceiling collapsed and this angel comes into the room. And then I wrote a poem. I'm not a poet, but I wrote this *thing*. It was many pages long. After I finished it, I put it away. No one will ever see it. Its title was "Angels in America." (The World Only Spins Forward, 1)

This personal genesis underscores the extent to which the play emerges from lived experience, transforming Kushner's private grief and personal experience with the AIDS crisis into a collective narrative that reflects the broader experience of the gay community during the 1980s. Ultimately, while the AIDS crisis remains central to *Angels in America*, Kushner uses it as a lens through which to examine larger questions of faith, identity, and belonging. Religious frameworks, particularly those of Judaism and Mormonism, play a crucial role in shaping the play's cosmology. Unlike conventional Protestant depictions of angels as benevolent

messengers, Kushner's Angel is ambiguous, even authoritarian, demanding obedience and stasis rather than offering comfort or guiding words. This reinterpretation reflects the play's broader skepticism toward institutional authority and its impact on marginalized communities.

Through Prior's prophetic burden, Joe's repression, and the Angel's unsettling demands, *Angels in America* ultimately interrogates what it means to exist in a nation that promises inclusion yet perpetuates exclusion. The play suggests that America, like the Angel's Heaven, is in crisis, not because of change, but because of the resistance to it.

Jacob and the Angel

A crucial theological and literary framework for understanding *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* lies in the Jacob Cycle, a series of narratives in *Genesis* (chapters 25–35) that recount the life and transformation of the patriarch Jacob. Among these episodes, Genesis 32:22–32, Jacob's nocturnal struggle at the ford of the Jabbok serves as the most significant intertext for Kushner's play. In this passage, Jacob, preparing to confront his estranged brother Esau, is confronted by an unidentified figure and wrestles with him through the night:

> The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and

> prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Penial, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle. (Genesis 32.22-32)

This encounter culminates in both physical injury, as Jacob's hip is dislocated, and both spiritual and political transformation, as he is renamed Israel, meaning "one who strives with God." This transformation is spiritual in the sense that Jacob takes on the spiritual body of the land of Israel that was given to God's chosen people. Jacob is one of the patriarchs of Israel; a descendant of Abraham and forefather to David, both of whom are significant figures in the Hebrew Bible. As patriarchs of Israel, they represent a connection with the divine as the head of the family of God's chosen people. Notably, in Genesis the text never definitively identifies Jacob's opponent as an Angel. The figure is described only as a "man" in this passage, though Jacob later claims to have seen God "face to face" (32:30). Despite this, Jacob's opponent is often regarded as an Angel in both Christian and Jewish teachings. In the book of Hosea, the deity that Jacob wrestles with is identified specifically as an Angel (Lipshitz, 205).

Scholars such as Lipschitz emphasize the importance of this episode to Kushner's writing, arguing that *Angels in America* "re-performs" the Jacob Cycle as a form of queer theological and political discourse. For Lipschitz, Jacob's struggle becomes a model for resistance, transformation, and the forging of identity through conflict. Importantly, this struggle is not merely personal; as the renaming of Jacob to Israel suggests, it carries collective and political implications, establishing the identity of an entire people. Lipshitz analyzes how the

Jacob cycle as a crucial Jewish text is reimagined and reperformed throughout the play, as Kushner presents the cycle "as a Jewish political legacy" where he wished "to effect change in public American discourse regarding sexuality, AIDS, politics, and religion" (231). Throughout the essay, Lipshitz analyzes the ways in which Jacob's story can be read through the lens of queerness and gender identity, pulling in Theodore Jennings' reading of the text as homoerotic (two men wrestle in close quarters, Jacob's injury to his hip being read as an attack on his reproductive organs). Lipshitz also looks at the characters of Joe and Prior through the lens of the Jacob cycle, analyzing Joe as Jacob and Prior as Israel. By contrast, the heir to the Jewish tradition of resistance is actually Prior; a non-Jewish gay man with AIDS is the new "Israel," who, through his metaphorical and literal wrestling with the Angel of America throughout the play, realizes the words of the verse "you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (223).

Kushner adapts and reconfigures this biblical paradigm through multiple characters, most notably Joe Pitt and Prior Walter. Joe's engagement with the Jacob story, introduced in an argument with Harper in Act 2 Scene 2 of *Millenium Approaches*, reveals a profoundly internalized and fearful interpretation of the struggle:

> Joe: I had a book of Bible stories when I was a kid. There was a picture I'd look at twenty times every day: Jacob wrestles with the angel. I don't really remember the story, or why the wrestling—just the picture. Jacob is young and very strong. The angel is…a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings of course. I still dream about it. Many nights. I'm…It's me. In that struggle. Fierce, and unfair. The angel is not human, and it holds nothing back, so how could anyone human win, what kind of fight is that? It's not just. Losing

> means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn from God's. But you can't not lose. (2.2.12-27)

For Joe, the wrestling match signifies an unwinnable conflict, reflecting his internalized homophobia and his perception of queerness as incompatible with his religious identity. His desire for God to "crush" and remake him underscores a theology of annihilation rather than transformation. As Lipschitz observes, Joe understands Jacob's struggle as emblematic of "the trap of life in the closet," a condition defined by fear, repression, and inevitability of defeat (212). For Joe, the Angel represents grappling with desire, something that is "not human" and "holds nothing back." Beyond grappling with a life of repression in the closet, as Lipshitz notes, Joe is grappling with a desire forbidden by cultural norms and foundations of the faith which he was brought up in.

In contrast, Prior's metaphorical grappling with the Angel culminates in Act V, Scene I of *Perestroika,* where Prior, while in the hospital, is approached by the Angel. His nurse, Hannah, is able to see the Angel and tells Prior to wrestle with the Angel and ask the Angel to bless him, quoting a verse from Genesis, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me!" (Kushner 259). Prior then literally grapples with the Angel, repeating that he will not let it go unless it blesses him. Prior rejects the Angel and its prophecy, saying "Free me! Unfetter me! Bless me or whatever, but I will be let go" (*Perestroika,* 5.1.38-39). Prior injures the Angel in the struggle, before a ladder appears and the two ascend into Heaven, where Prior is blessed with "more life," or in other words, progress, a transformation from how Prior began the play as a dying man. Through taking action, rejecting the book, and injuring the Angel, Prior rejects stasis. Unlike Jacob, who willfully accepts his transformation into Israel, Prior actively challenges that authority. He injures the Angel in the struggle, reversing the biblical dynamic in which the

human is wounded by the divine. As opposed to saying that he will not let the Angel go, Prior states that he will be let go, all the while still holding on to the Angel as she attempts to ascend to Heaven. This inversion is significant: Prior's resistance produces not submission but agency. His eventual blessing, "more life," redefines divine favor not as obedience, but as the affirmation of continued existence, change, and progress.

This reinterpretation aligns with Lipschitz's argument that Prior, rather than Joe, becomes the true inheritor of the name "Israel." As a gay man with AIDS, Prior embodies the condition of one who "strives with God," transforming suffering into resistance. His struggle is both deeply personal and political, mirroring the dual significance of Jacob's encounter in Genesis. Prior grapples with the angel not only in a literal and physical sense towards the end of *Perestroika,* where Prior wrestles with the Angel and injures her, but in a spiritual and political sense, as Prior demands to be "let go" not just by the Angel but by her call for Prior to act as a prophet for her Anti-Migratory Epistle. He ultimately demands that he will be let go from the confines of his exclusion from society as a gay man with AIDS. The demand for a blessing of "more life" is not just literal; it is a demand to be allowed to live freely as himself and to be recognized as an American regardless of his sickness.

Further complicating this reading, we may consider Theodore Jennings's homoerotic interpretation of the Jacob narrative in *Jacob's Wound: Homoerotic Narrative in the Literature of Ancient Israel*. Jennings argues that the physical intimacy of the wrestling match, combined with the injury to Jacob's hip, invites a reading of the text that foregrounds erotic tension and vulnerability. He situates the encounter at the Jabbok as a "liminal space," where conventional boundaries, between human and divine, violence and intimacy, collapse. Jennings writes: "The very suggestion that there may be homoeroticism in Hebrew narrative, in the OT, may seem odd

given the all too common supposition that the religion and culture of ancient Israel resolutely opposed same sex relationships of an erotic nature" (X). This reading not only challenges assumptions about the absence of homoeroticism in Hebrew scripture but also provides a parallel to Kushner's work, where bodily suffering, desire, and divine encounter are deeply intertwined. Jenning's reading of Jacob's struggle ties back to both Joe and Prior's wrestling, both through Joe's envisioning of the Angel as a symbol of homoerotic desire and the contrast of Prior embodying Jacob, a symbol of a foundational Jewish and Christian text, as a gay man with AIDS.

Through these layered reinterpretations, Kushner transforms the Jacob Cycle into a framework for exploring queer identity, religious conflict, and political resistance. The biblical narrative of wrestling with the divine becomes, in *Angels in America*, a metaphor for confronting systems of power, whether theological, social, or political, that demand stasis. Prior's ultimate refusal to accept the Angel's command marks a decisive break from passive obedience, recasting the act of struggle itself as a form of liberation.

The Book of Mormon

While there is much scholarship discussing *Angels in America* within the context of the AIDS crisis, or within the sole context of either Judaism or Mormonism, there is little scholarship to be found that discusses how both religious allusions function together within the text. *Millennium Approaches* initially appears to treat Mormonism as a stand-in catch-all for conservative protestant denominations of Christianity. However, *Perestroika* interacts with the foundational texts of the LDS church with the same seriousness and curiosity as it interacts with the Jacob Cycle and foundational Jewish and Christian texts, as Kushner recreates the origins of

the *Book of Mormon,* ultimately placing the Jacob Cycle in conversation with Mormonism in order to further his argument of transformation and progress.

The title page of the 1840 edition of the *Book of Mormon* attributes Joseph Smith Jr. as the translator of the text, not the author. The introduction of the Penguin Classics edition of the text by Laurie F. Maffley-Kipp provides the context in which the book was written, as well as the context of the larger cultural and religious moment in which Joseph Smith Jr. was writing. The text came to be during the early nineteenth century and the time of the Second Great Awakening, a "significant religious revival that began in the late 18th century, marking a response to perceived moral decay and a decline in organized religion in the United States" that saw an uptick in revivalist theology and the growth of many Protestant denominations, taking inspiration from the First Great Awakening of the 1790s (Clark & Helm). In this context, Mormonism was not an anomaly but part of a broader cultural and religious movement that emphasized direct, ongoing encounters with the divine.

According to Maffley-Kipps' introduction, the story of Joseph Smith Jr.'s finding of the Book and translation of it is intrinsic to the core beliefs and legitimacy of the Mormon faith. "one's reading of the Book of Mormon cannot be separated from the story of Smith himself" (Maffley-Kipp, xi). Joseph Smith Jr. claims to have been visited by the Angel Moroni, one of the text's authors and the last surviving member of the Nephites in his time, in 1823. According to Smith, Moroni told him that there were golden plates buried in a nearby hillside. Smith later dug up the plates, before reportedly translating the hieroglyphics on the golden plates by placing a seer stone in a hat, then peering into the hat where he saw images of the events detailed in the hieroglyphics. Smith dictated what he was seeing to a scribe. This transcription later came to be known as *The Book of Mormon*. After the Angel Moroni took back the tablets and Smith began

to circulate his text, he proclaimed himself a "prophet chosen by God to deliver news to his contemporaries about ancient peoples dating back as far as the middle of the third millennium BCE" (xiv).

Within the context of the Second Great Awakening, the *Book of Mormon* "represented a fulfillment and restoration of biblical truths and a token of God's continuing activity in the world—claims that have been met with hostility and profound skepticism by many, and enthusiasm and commitment by those who take its declarations seriously" (Maffley-Kipp, xi). A core facet of both the creation of the *Book of Mormon* as well as the Mormon faith is the idea of continuing revelation or theophany, continuing interactions with and messages from the divine. For the *Book of Mormon* and the teachings and stories of Joseph Smith Jr. to be received as valid religious teachings, and a revelation from God, the precedent must be set that God is continuing to interact with and reveal himself and his word to his followers. Within a religious context, continuing theophany is defined as ongoing revelation from and communication with the divine. As Maffely-Kipp writes:

> Rather than the concept of one revealed text—the Bible—providing a complete understanding of God's plan, the Book of Mormon implied (and the narrative itself stated) that there were many records still to be discerned […] The Book of Mormon promised this, but it also symbolized, in material form, the restoration of the correct divine-human relationship. (xxi)

The validity of the Book of Mormon as a text with the same spiritual significance as the Bible (as an irrefutable divinely inspired document) depends on the belief that God still tangibly interacts with his disciples and that revelation continues. For Smith, this takes the form of his claimed interactions with the Angel Moroni and the golden plates. For members of the LDS church

today, continuing revelation takes the form of the General Conference, where members of the church gather to "share messages" and discuss their teachings (General Conference – church of Jesus Christ).

This theological framework is essential for understanding how Tony Kushner reimagines Mormon cosmology in *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. Kushner directly invokes and subverts the narrative of Joseph Smith's revelation in *Perestroika* Act 2, Scene 2, where Prior recounts his encounter with the Angel. Like Moroni, the Angel arrives as a divine messenger tied to an American identity. However, the Angel of America arrives to Prior in a destructive and dramatic fashion, with "*a gust of music"* and a near nonsensical speech, claiming to be the "Bird of America, the Bald Eagle" (*Perestroika,* 2.2.8). This association invokes national symbolism, freedom, expansion, and mobility, yet inherently contradicts the Angel's central demand: the cessation of human migration and progress.

The Steel Book itself is revealed to have been hidden underneath the tiles of Prior's kitchen floor after the Angel of America tells Prior to dig it out. The stage notes dictate, "*An enormous gust of wind knocks Prior over. He glances at her from the floor and shakes his head no. A standoff. The Angel coughs a little. There is a small explosion in the kitchen offstage. A cloud of plaster dust drifts in"* (*Perestroika,* 162). This discovery, as Kushner recreates it, is comically turbulent, with an exaggerated physicality as Prior is knocked over by a wind gust and a small cloud of dust drifts onto the scene from offstage. There is a standoff between Prior and the Angel, another moment of resistance on behalf of Prior. This moment of comedy pokes fun at the Angel's insistence. Throughout the play, the Angel's attempts to halt the migratory patterns of humans are made to seem ridiculous. At its core, the plan of the Continental Principalities, the seven Angels whom Prior encounters in Heaven, to bring God back to Heaven, is one that is

inherently antagonistic and negative towards the ideals of America as a nation of personal freedoms and liberty.

Kushner emphasizes this contradiction through both tone and staging. The Angel's arrival is chaotic and destructive, marked by explosions, gusts of wind, and disjointed speech, as the Angel proclaims, "And Lo, the Prophet was led by his nightly dreams to the hiding place of the Sacred Implements, and—Revision in the text: the Angel helped him unearth them, for he was week of body (*Pissed-off)* though not of will" (2.2.59-64). The attempt to recreate Joseph Smith Jr.'s discovery is comedic, which contradicts the inherent seriousness of the Angels' push to stop migratory patterns, an effort made by the seven Continental Principalities, a group of Angels who represent the seven continents. Where Smith is portrayed as a willing participant in divine revelation, actively translating and disseminating sacred knowledge, Prior rejects both the message and the role of prophet, despite the Angel of America's insistence. His resistance reframes continuing theophany not as passive reception but as active negotiation. Revelation, in Kushner's play, is not inherently authoritative. Revelation must be questioned, resisted, and reinterpreted.

Kushner's reinterpretation of continuing theophany gains further significance when situated within the historical context of the late twentieth-century LDS Church. As Benjamin Park argues in *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism*, the Church in the 1970s and 1980s became increasingly aligned with conservative political movements, emphasizing traditional family structures and resisting emerging discourses around gender and sexuality. This shift occurred despite Mormonism's origins in a radically transformative religious movement rooted in ongoing revelation. The tension between these origins and later institutional conservatism is central to Kushner's critique.

This politization of the LDS church, and simultaneously other Christian groups, is represented through Joe's Act 1 of *Millennium Approaches,* Harper and Joe, after Joe is asked by Roy Cohn to move to Washington D.C. to work within the Justice Department. While Joe insists that the world is on the mend, Harper gives examples of why the world is still a dangerous and scary place. Joe says:

> Joe: Wait. for good. Change for the good America has rediscovered itself. Its sacred position among nations And people aren't ashamed of that like they used to be. This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. That's what President Reagan's done, Harper. He says: "Truth exists and can be spoken proudly." And the country responds to him. We become better. More good. I need to be a part of that, I need something big to lift me up. I mean, six years ago the world seemed in decline, horrible, hopeless, full of unresolved problems and crime and confusion and hunger and—
>
> Harper: But it still seems that way. More now than before. They say the ozone layer is— (*Millenium Approaches* 1.5.101-116).

Joe's monologue ties into the longing of the Continental Principalities' desire to bring God back to heaven. The longing of the Angel's desire to bring God back to heaven is representative of a longing from the American people to return to a supposed time in America where "truth exists and can be spoken proudly." Truth, in this case, being a subjective conservative religious and political belief system, which Joe has tied himself to. Harper's rebuttal, while seemingly nonsensical, alludes to the larger holes in Joe's argument. Harper brings up the hole in the ozone layer, which she learned about on the radio. While this doesn't present an immediate threat to their well-being, similarly to how the AIDS crisis and the poor treatment of queer individuals in

this time do not immediately present a danger to Joe as a closeted gay man, the hole in the ozone layer is a legitimate and unwaveringly present issue, just as the nature of a life in the closet presents an unwaveringly present issue for Joe.

By reworking the foundational narrative of Mormon revelation, Kushner exposes the dangers of a theology that demands stasis under the guise of divine authority. The Angel of America, like Moroni, seeks a prophet through whom to deliver a message to humanity. However, unlike Smith, Prior refuses to comply. His rejection transforms the concept of continuing theophany into a site of resistance rather than submission.

As Christine Hutchison-Jones observes in "Center and Periphery: Mormons and American Culture in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," both Mormon communities and queer individuals share histories of marginalization and negotiation within American culture. Hutchison-Jones writes that both Mormons and queer people "have negotiated…the tricky process of accommodating to American culture while maintaining a sense of their religious and cultural distinctness. So while some scholars argue that 'the archetype for the transformation of identity, which is the mark of queer experience and survival in the play, is the wandering, rootless, shape-shifting Jew who never finds a home, in fact, the Mormons and their protracted migration west in the nineteenth century provide another example of the 'rootless, shape-shifting' other" (9). Kushner draws on this parallel, positioning Mormonism not only as a source of repression but also as a framework through which alternative forms of identity and transformation can be imagined. In doing so, he reclaims the logic of continuing revelation as a call not for obedience, but for change.

Ultimately, Kushner's reimagining of the Book of Mormon's origin story underscores a central tension in *Angels in America*: revelation can either enforce stasis or inspire

transformation. Through Prior's refusal, the play aligns itself firmly with the latter, redefining divine communication as an ongoing, contested process that demands human agency.

Recreation and Progress

The core scriptures that Kushner alludes to in his work, including the Jacob Cycle and the origin of the Book of Mormon, inherently represent change and transformation that is contradictory to the stasis that the Angel, and subsequently the American religious moment that the Angel represents, promotes. Despite being parallel to Louis, who is Jewish, and Joe, who is Mormon, Prior, who is entirely separate from both faiths, is the one to fulfill the roles of Joseph Smith and Jacob, who represent transformation in their own contexts; Joseph Smith Jr. in continuing theophany and Jacob in spiritual transformation through struggle. Through wrestling with the Angel, Prior embodies Jacob in the moment of transformation when Jacob becomes Israel. As Lipshitz writes, "the heir to the Jewish tradition of resistance is actually Prior; a non-Jewish gay man with AIDS is the new 'Israel,' who realizes the words of the verse 'you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (223). Prior takes the role of "Israel," in that, as Jacob's transformation marked the birth of a national identity for God's chosen people, Prior's triumph over the Angel and embodiment of Joseph Smith Jr. and Jacob as a gay man with AIDS marks a new American identity, one that is inclusive of those deemed unworthy.

In the final lines of the play, Prior delivers a closing monologue in which he directly addresses these tensions and points towards new possibilities. He says:

> Prior: The disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We

won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

And I bless you: *More Life.*

The great work begins.(Kushner 290; Epilogue).

Just as his transformation came from struggle, Prior declares that those affected by HIV/AIDS, living and dead alike, will continue to struggle toward progress in refusal to be pushed aside and forgotten for their identities and illnesses.

In that final monologue, Prior is not just Prior, but instead, he represents the broader collective of queer people who have suffered as a result of repression, through the AIDS crisis and beyond. Just as his transformation came from struggle, Prior declares that those affected by HIV/AIDS, the living and the dead alike, will continue to struggle toward progress in refusal to be pushed aside and forgotten for their identities and illnesses. The ending message of the play is not one of victory, but an acknowledgment of the struggle that has already transformed and a call to continue struggling and working towards progress. Continuing theophany here is not just ongoing revelation from the divine, but the act of searching for ways to change and improve and refuse the stasis that forced men like Prior to live as outcasts in their own country, and men like Joe to stay closeted. Prior concludes his final monologue by blessing the audience "more life," calling back to the blessing he received from the Angel. More life is a blessing of progress, the blessing of being seen and refusing to die quietly. More life is a call to action for the audience, urging them to struggle and transform in the face of adversity, and a reminder that the work toward ensuring that no one else is forced to live a secret death is not yet finished.

Conclusion

Both Jewish and Mormon teachings are filled with moments of transformation, such as Jacob's transformation when wrestling the Angel and the founding stories of the Book of Mormon. These moments of transformation are inherent to the foundations of these religions, as Jacob's physical, spiritual, and political transformation represents a new chapter for the lineage of the Israelites, and the discovery of the *Book of Mormon* represents the birth of a faith that relies on revelation and change. Revelations from the divine are not necessarily literal revelations, but instead, a shift in a cultural understanding of these religious moments. By having Prior, a gay man with AIDS who has no tie to either the *Book of Mormon* or the Jacob cycle, embody these transformations, Kushner demands that the audience consider the ways in which stasis is inherently contradictory to the transformative nature of the stories that Prior recreates.

Following the initial release of *Millenium Approaches,* "Dramatizing AIDS" is a review of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* written by Richard Hornby and published in *The Hudson Review* in 1993. Hornby's review is largely positive, commenting on how Kushner's depiction of AIDS differs from other depictions, as he writes, "In most AIDS plays, the disease is exploited for cheap sympathy, but in *Angels* it embodies the realities of desire and death in an unfeeling, escapist society" (189). Hornby notes how Kushner creates conflict and nuance throughout the play by subverting the inherent melodrama of Prior's illness and allowing Louis to react negatively to Prior's disease. Hornby's review offers insight into how the play was initially received by audiences following its release. It also, in its few pages, offers a window into the public perception of the disease, as Hornby writes "(I did actually read of a right-wing preacher who thanked God for the disease, which he saw as righteous punishment for homosexuals,

though he did not make it clear why the Almighty seems to have it out for hemophiliacs too)" (190).

The 2013 revised and complete edition of *Angels in America* includes an introduction from Tony Kushner, in which he reflected on the play's lasting impact in the years since its first production. In this forward, he reflects not only on *Angels in America,* but the changing world around him. He specifically references that he wrote the introduction "the day before America goes to the polls to vote for Mitt Romney or Barack Obama for president. This is the place from which it seems to me I've always written, perched on the knife's edge of terror and hope" (Kushner, xi). Looking back on this introduction, following the Obama administration and the landmark 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court ruling that federally legalized same sex marriage, much has been accomplished in the way of social progress. However, the work towards a better America is not finished.

In November of 2025, the Associated Press released an article headlined "Supreme Court rejects call to overturn its decision legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide," following an appeal from Kim Davis, a county clerk who began denying same-sex couples marriage certificates following the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that legalized same sex marriage, to overturn the ruling on the basis of "religious freedom." This example is one of countless headlines from the past few years detailing the rising social and political turmoil in the United States, and globally. Kushner's argument ultimately transcends the historical moment of the AIDS crisis. While the play is deeply rooted in the 1980s, its call for transformation remains urgent. The persistence of discrimination and political resistance to LGBTQ+ rights demonstrates that the struggle continues.

By reframing continuing theophany as an ongoing human process rather than solely divine revelation, Kushner positions transformation as both necessary and unending. The structures that enforce stasis, religious, political, and cultural, persist, and so too must resistance. Minority groups in America, including queer, religious, and ethnic minorities, continue to face oppression in America. Transformation has taken place for decades following the AIDS crisis. However, to transform once will never be enough.

In the Epilogue, we see that Hannah, Joe's conservative mother, has remained friends with Prior, Louis, and Belize for years following the events of the play. While there is no explicit mention that Hannah has had a change of heart regarding her views on the queer community, whether Hannah has had that change of heart is not necessarily relevant. The opening stage notes of the Epilogue read: "*Hannah is noticeably different—she looks like a New Yorker, and she's reading an issue of* The Nation" (Kushner, 287; Epilogue). The ways in which Hannah is "noticeably different" are ambiguous and left to interpretation. Regardless, she is different in a way that has allowed her to continue seeing Prior, Louis, and Belize as friends, not enemies to her faith. This is the small progress and transformation that ultimately prevents those like Prior from dying secret deaths and allows the world to continue spinning forward.

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