Theology for the Approaching Millennium: *Angels in America*, Activism, and the American Religion

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SINCE ITS NEW YORK DEBUT three years ago, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*—the most sustained treatment of Mormonism to play on the Broadway stage since Jerome Kern's *The Girl from Utah* in 1914—has earned a Pulitzer Prize, a room full of Tony Awards, the earnest praise of New York drama critics, and, not least of all, several surprisingly even-handed responses from Latter-day Saint critics and scholars. After reading David Pace's praise in his review for *Dialogue*, Michael Evenden's balanced appraisal in *Sunstone*, and the even-tempered reviews of the play's Salt Lake opening by nearly every theater critic in the state of Utah, a neutral observer might have some difficulty believing that Mormons are the closed-minded, hypocritical people portrayed in Kushner's play. If anything, the Mormon critics and reviewers who have tackled the play so far have gone to such lengths to be fair in their treatment of *Angels in America* that they have ended up praising with faint damnation elements of the play that are genuinely and justifiably offensive to the vast majority of their fellow Latter-day Saints.[1]

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1. Michael Evenden, "Angels in a Mormon Gaze," *Sunstone* 17 (Sept. 1994), 55-64; David Pace, "Mormon Angels in America," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Winter 1994): 191-97. Other important Mormon responses to *Angels in America* include a panel discussion at the 1994 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium entitled "Mormons and Mormonism in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" featuring David Pace, Colleen McDannell, David Fletcher, and Dwight Cook (Session Tape #334), and four papers given at the 1996 Association for Mormon Letters annual conference and scheduled for publication in the 1997 *Annals of the Association for Mormon Letters*: "Casserole Myth; Religious Motif and Inclusivity in *Angels in America*," by John-Charles Duffy; "Sea-Changed Iconography: Tony Kushner's Use and Abuse of Mormon Images and Traditions in *Angels in America*," by Sandra Ballif Straubhaar; and "Through a Glass Darkly: Mormons as Perceived by Critics' Reviews of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," by Dan Stout, Joe Straubhaar, and Gayle Newbold, and an early version of the current essay, "Theology for the Approaching Millennium: Angels, Activism, and the American Religion."

Whatever one may think about how Kushner treats Mormonism in *Angels in America*, the fact remains that he *does* treat Mormonism—and his treatment is richer and more complex than that of nearly any other non-Mormon writer of our century; however, this significant fact does not seem to have registered with much of the play's non-Mormon audience. A recent study by three members of the BYU communications department surveyed 370 published reviews of *Angels in America* and found that only 68 of them, or 22 percent, even acknowledged the fact there were Mormons in the play at all. And the reviews that do treat the Mormon element generally see it as an interesting sidelight or as a bit of local color that could be entirely removed from the play without substantially affecting its overall presentation. Throughout the play's successful runs, reviewers have either failed to notice the Mormon element at all or have persisted in seeing Mormonism as a metaphor for the play's "real" concerns, such as conservatism, corporate greed, institutionalized religion, or society's duty to tolerate everybody—even the Mormons.[2]

My primary assertion here is that the Mormon element in *Angels in America* is not a *metaphor* for anything other than itself—any more than homosexuality, race, AIDS, or politics are metaphors for anything other than themselves. Above all else, *Angels in America* is a play about America: its problems, its values, its struggle with the terrible pandemic of AIDS, and even its occasional potential for good.[3] And though Tony Kushner demonstrates, in far too many places, that he lacks anything more than a superficial understanding of contemporary Mormon culture,[4] he has managed to portray something that very few contemporary

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2. Stout, Straubhaar, and Newbold, "Through a Glass Darkly."

3. In an interview with David Savran entitled "Tony Kushner Considers the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness" (*American Theatre*, Oct. 1994), Kushner follows the lead of his character Louis Ironson in stating that America, though flawed, is salvageable: "I really believe that there is the potential for radical democracy in our country, one of the few places on Earth where I see it as a strong possibility. There is an American tradition of liberalism, of a kind of social justice, fair play and tolerance. . . . It may be sentimentalism on my part because I am the child of liberal-pinko parents. But I do believe in it—as much as I often find it despicable" (27).

4. Perhaps the most inaccurate perception of contemporary Mormonism that Kushner perpetuates is that any Mormon who has left Utah has abandoned his or her religious community. The two major Mormon characters—Joe and Harper Pitt—are never shown interacting with other Mormons in church or in a social setting, nor do they ever refer to doing so, and when Joe's mother, Hannah Pitt, contemplates leaving Utah, her neighbor (a fanatically devoted Mormon who just happens to be smoking a cigarette) warns her that "this [Utah] is the place of the saints" and that "every step a Believer takes away from here is fraught with peril" (*Millennium Approaches*, 83). Given how important the communitarian ethic is to *Angels in America*, it is disturbing that Kushner's representation of Mormonism would deny one of the elements that so many contemporary Mormons find most appealing about their religion: the fact that they feel a sense of community with their coreligionists wherever they may live.

Mormons fully realize about their own religion: it is intimately bound up with the history, literature, and spiritual development of America. The visions and prophecies of Joseph Smith, as Harold Bloom has recently argued, have been more influential in American thought than all but a few Mormons—and even fewer non-Mormons—have understood. "Mormonism" has come to mean something more than simply the "religion of the Mormons"; it is a philosophical and ethical system whose influence extends beyond either its original or its current practitioners. *Angels in America* mirrors this dynamic perfectly: the play's Mormons are largely represented as provincial, conservative, small-minded individuals who are ill prepared to cope with the real world—by which Kushner seems to mean about six blocks of New York City. The play's Mormonism, on the other hand, is something else altogether. Images drawn from Mormon history and iconography form an important part of the play's magical-realist element, and the events surrounding the Mormon migration become central to the author's vision of progression and social change. It is therefore my argument that the social, political, and cultural agendas that Kushner invokes throughout *Angels in America* have a fundamentally Mormon component and that Kushner's calls for liberal social change and revolutionary action can be profitably analyzed through lenses crafted by Joseph Smith's revolutionary revisions of traditional Christian and Jewish thought.

In offering the above assertion, I implicitly make another argument: Mormonism has an intellectually rigorous, compelling theological framework that can be used to analyze literature, culture, and history in a way that is beneficial to both the church and the scholarly community. This, in my opinion, is a point that Mormon scholars must continually emphasize. Elsewhere, I have made the following argument about the possibility of a "Mormon literary criticism":

> At its best, literary theory is not merely a way to analyze literature, but a way to use literature to analyze the world. And since Mormonism—like Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, or existentialism—contains its own philosophical assumptions and values, it does not matter what we ultimately write *about* but who we write *as*. . . . A Mormon literary critic, then, is nothing more or less than a Mormon who does literary criticism—and does so as a Mormon, raising and answering questions about her faith in the process.[5]

The analysis that follows represents my best attempt to perform this kind of critical intervention and to write *as* a Mormon literary critic, using the theology of Mormonism as a philosophical framework for reading a text

5. Michael Austin, "The Function of Mormon Literary Criticism at the Present Time," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Winter 1995): 143.

in much the same way that feminists, Marxists, Freudians, and other literary critics have, for most of the century, used their philosophical perspectives as the basis for literary interpretation. I am aware of the fact that, in proposing such readings, critics often risk going substantially beyond what an author actually "intended" in a given work. I do not find this problematic. Sophocles certainly did not anticipate Freud when he wrote *Oedipus Rex*, but today we are far more likely to associate the term "Oedipal" with the play's most famous interpreter than with its ancient author. Whatever Tony Kushner may personally think about Mormons, I believe that *Angels in America* is a text that cries out for a Mormon reading—not just for an analysis of overt Mormon elements, but for a penetrating analysis of the way that the play's most important elements have been shaped—consciously and unconsciously—by the Mormon experience in America.

For ease of reference, I will use the title *Angels in America* as a blanket designation for two different plays by Tony Kushner: *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches* and *Angels in America Part II: Perestroika*.[6] Though these two plays are substantially different in character, tenor, and tone, they share almost all of the same characters and tell an essentially continuous story that can be profitably analyzed as a single unit. The plot of the combined plays is driven by one of the oldest standard devices known to stage comedy: two separate sets of lovers who combine in unpredictable ways that precipitate multiple complications. The first pair of lovers is a seemingly traditional Mormon couple, Joe and Harper Pitt, who have been transplanted from Utah to New York while Joe serves as the chief law clerk to a conservative appeals court judge. The second consists of two liberal, sophisticated gay men—Prior Walter and Louis Ironson—who have been together in a monogamous relationship for four years and who discover in the opening scenes that Prior has AIDS. Before long, both relationships begin to unravel and the four become entangled: Louis proves unable to cope with Prior's sickness and leaves him in a fit of desperation. Joe finally acknowledges that he is a homosexual and leaves Harper to live with Louis. Harper and Prior, abandoned by their supposedly ideal mates, begin to meet each other in dream states that are brought on, in Harper's case, by her addiction to Valium, and in Prior's, by the fact that he has been selected by an angel to be the next American prophet. From this point, *Angels in America* proceeds along two distinct but highly interrelated avenues: the realistic, in which the main charac-

6. The published versions of the two plays are: *Angels in America Part I: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1993); *Angels in America Part II: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994). In-text citations of the two plays will include a page number preceded by either *MA* for *Millennium Approaches* or *P* for *Perestroika*.

ters must work out their relationships to each other, their understandings of themselves, their participation in society, and their vulnerability to the devastation of AIDS; and the mythic, in which Prior must come to grips with the metaphysical consequences of having been selected as a prophet by a group of less-than-competent angels who cannot come to grips with the fact that God has abandoned them.

As some have already noted, Kushner's use of Mormonism goes far beyond his use of openly Mormon characters[7]: the entire concept of an angelic visitation to an American prophet is directly appropriated from Mormon sacred history, and even most casual students of history or theology, when presented with an image of an angel crashing into a young man's bedroom with a sacred, hidden book, would probably recall something about Joseph Smith and the "Golden Bible." Kushner himself has acknowledged the debt he owes to Mormon iconography and has admitted that the very notion of an "American Angel" suggested a play about Mormons:

> I started the play with an image of an angel crashing through a bedroom ceiling, and I knew that this play would have a connection to American themes. The title came from that, and I think the title, as much as anything, suggested Mormonism because the prototypical American Angel is the Angel Moroni. It's of this continent, the place in Mormon mythology that Jesus visited after he was crucified. It's a great story—not the Book of Mormon . . . but the story of Joseph Smith's life and the trek, the gathering of Zion.[8]

True to his inspiration, Kushner incorporates many of the elements that Joseph Smith made famous into the dramatic vision that Prior experiences at the end of *Millennium Approaches* and explains at the beginning of *Perestroika.* In this vision we get glimpses of a buried book, peep stones, a prophetic calling, and a charge to spread a new gospel to the ends of the earth. Even the language surrounding the angel's visit borrows from the Mormon vernacular with phrases such as "truth restored" (*MA,* 26), "a marvelous work and a wonder" (*MA,* 62), and "Prophet. Seer. [and] Revelator" (*MA,* 88). It is my intention, however, to suggest a connection between Mormonism and *Angels in America* that goes beyond either direct character representation or thinly veiled historical allegory. In addition to these direct uses of Mormonism, I believe that there is an element of Mormon theology squarely at the center of the play's social consciousness.

If it is true, as I argue, that part of Kushner's use of Mormon theology

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7. See especially Evenden's "Angels in a Mormon Gaze" and Straubhaar's "Sea-Changed Iconography."

8. Savran, 102.

in *Angels in America* is intentional, then the source of his theological musings must almost certainly be Harold Bloom, the dynamic American literary critic that Kushner has repeatedly credited as a driving force behind his work. In the introduction to *Perestroika*, Kushner acknowledges his debt to both Bloom's *Book of J* and his introduction to Olivier D'Allones's *Musical Variations on Jewish Thought* (7). In the Afterword to the same play, he mentions Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (157). Kushner's appropriation of Bloom's work has been so great, he reports, that, upon being invited to meet the great scholar, he "fled from the encounter as one of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* tribesmen might flee from a meeting with [the] primal father" (*P*, 158). Significantly, Bloom's *The American Religion*, which Kushner has cited as an influence on his writing, also contains one of the most daring and sympathetic readings of Mormon theology ever attempted by a non-Mormon scholar.[9]

Bloom's focus throughout *The American Religion* is on a uniquely American spirituality that differs from its European counterparts and antecedents along the same lines that the early American republic differed from the monarchies of the Old World. In the European religion, Bloom argues, God is the ultimate aristocrat, an all-powerful monarch who rules absolutely and who is essentially superior to his depraved subjects. What the American religion attempts to do, then, is "to bring about in the spiritual realm what the American Revolution . . . inaugurated in the sociopolitical world" by democratizing the relationship between humanity and divinity. Bloom's American Religion cannot be mapped on to any single denomination; it is, rather, a set of theological tenets that are spread across the entire spectrum of religious worship in America. However, America's most successful indigenous theology has earned Bloom's special notice. "If there is already in place any authentic version of the American religion," he argues, "then . . . it must be the Mormons, whose future as yet may prove decisive for the nation."[10]

While Bloom's analysis of Mormon history and doctrine is necessar-

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9. I am grateful to Michael Evenden for first suggesting a similarity between *Angels in America* and *The American Religion* (New York: Touchstone, 1992). In a footnote to his article, "Angels in a Mormon Gaze," Evenden writes, "Bloom has written his own mocking/admiring misprision of Mormonism in *The American Religion*—one wonders if Kushner knew the book" (640). In his interview with Savran, Kushner acknowledges that he has read the book and that he considers it an important inspiration for his ideas about American community (26). However, the fact that Kushner gets much of his Mormon theology through Bloom means that he is far removed from the genuine article. For my purposes, it is more important to understand Kushner's perception of Mormonism rather than Mormonism itself; therefore, when either Bloom's or Kushner's perceptions of Mormonism seem to me to contradict actual Mormon teachings, I tend to concentrate mostly on their perceptions, which, though inaccurate, have been instrumental to the production of the text in question.

10. Bloom, 107, 97.

ily selective, his analysis of Mormonism, and of the "authentic religious genius" Joseph Smith, is one of the most compelling misreadings of Latter-day Saint theology ever offered.[11] In the three chapters devoted to Joseph Smith and Mormonism, he expounds on a number of Mormon doctrines—and an even larger number of speculative propositions by early Mormon leaders—that, in his opinion, make Mormonism essentially American. Four of the doctrines he mentions that bear directly on my argument are:

> (1) God is not a being of pure consciousness and infinite space, but a corporeal, material being who is subject to time, space, and passions.
> (2) God "organized us and our world, but did not create either, since we are as early and original as he is." This means that some part of the human soul, "what is best and oldest in us, goes back well before the creation."
> (3) God has not always been God, but he "began as a man" and "earned Godhood through his own efforts."
> (4) Human beings themselves are not locked into a role of eternal subservience. Just as God evolved from something human, so too can humans evolve to godhood themselves.[12]

The ultimate implication of these four doctrines, as Bloom rightly interprets them, is a version of the cosmos in which "God and man . . . differ only in degree, not in kind."[13] And with this belief comes a necessarily democratized conception of the relationship between the human and the divine. Rather than waiting for their marching orders and obeying them without question, American religionists actively seek revelation from God, and, when they disagree with the divine will, they do not hesitate to question, lobby, pester, and beg God until he changes his mind.

The overt image of divinity in *Angels in America* seems to have been much influenced by Bloom's notion that, in the American Religion, the distance between the human and the divine is minimal. This sentiment appears briefly in Prior's description of angels as "incredibly powerful bureaucrats" who "can do anything but they can't invent, create" (*P*, 49), directly echoing Bloom's assertion that "the Mormon God can organize, but he cannot create."[14] It is much more forcefully suggested, however, in the overtly sexual nature of both the angels and the humans who respond to their visits. Both Kushner's God and angels are portrayed in specifically corporeal terms, and the inhabitants of Kushner's metaphysical world are beings of body, parts, and passions whose generative powers are specifically linked to sexuality, which is presumed to be an eternal

11. Ibid., 97.
12. Ibid., 101, 103, 111.
13. Ibid., 105.
14. Ibid., 115.

force. Every appearance of Prior's angel is marked by some state of sexual arousal, and in her attempt to explain the mechanisms of creation to Prior, the angel states that "angelic orgasm makes protomatter, which fuels the Engine of Creation" (*P*, 49).

Most contemporary Mormons, I should acknowledge, would probably be offended by Kushner's approach to sexuality. Indeed, one of the fundamental premises of *Angels in America* seems to be that any sexual relationship between consenting adults is a good thing that should be available without restriction and pursued without guilt—a view that contrasts with both the historical and the contemporary Mormon view that proper heterosexual expression is something integral to, and inseparable from, the sacred covenants of marriage. However, even the most conservative Mormon should be able to recognize something vaguely (and perhaps even uncomfortably) familiar in Kushner's portrayal of angels in heaven who actually have sex. It has always been a fundamental tenant of Mormonism that the sexual power is divine, eternal, and exalting. In 1869 Orson Pratt, an early Mormon apostle and theologian, made essentially the same point unambiguously in a speech reprinted in the *Journal of Discourses*:

> Will that principle of love which exists now, and which has existed from the beginning, exist after the resurrection? I mean this sexual love. If that existed before the Fall, and if it has existed since then, will it exist in the eternal worlds after the resurrection? . . . When the sons and daughters of the Most High God come forth in the morning of the resurrection, this principle of love will exist in their bosoms just as it exists here, only intensified according to the increased knowledge and understanding which they possess . . . . According to the religious notions of the world these principles will not exist after the resurrection; but our religion teaches the fallacy of such notions.[15]

Though the Mormon church no longer practices polygamy, as it did in Pratt's day, Mormons still accept Pratt's basic argument as doctrine: heterosexual relations, within the bonds of marriage, are divine, eternal, and part of the very mechanism that "fuels the engine of creation."[16] This is not, of course, exactly what Kushner is saying in *Angels in America*, but

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15. *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: LDS Bookseller's Depot, 1855-86), 13 (7 Oct. 1869): 186-87.

16. In *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1955), Joseph Fielding Smith has written that both sexuality and procreation will be part of Celestial, but not Terrestrial or Telestial existence. "Some will gain celestial bodies with all the powers of exaltation and eternal increase," Smith writes, and they will "live in the family relationship." Those who achieve lesser kingdoms "will not have the power of increase, neither the power of nature to live as husbands and wives" but "will remain 'separately and singly' forever" (287).

the two views are strikingly similar in their view of one basic theological assumption: sexuality in particular, and corporeality in general, are good things. Unlike most Catholic and Protestant theologies, Mormonism does not see physical existence as a consequence of humanity's fallen nature. Mormon theology claims that we experience earth life specifically so that we can obtain a physical body, like the corporeal body of God, which we will ultimately carry with us (in resurrected form) when we are exalted to Godhood. Whereas most Christian religions see the body as a limiting factor to which humans are chained as a consequence of Adam's fall, Mormons see it as a blessing that makes us more like God; spiritual existence without a body is considered by Mormons a terrible impediment to eternal progress. Bloom correctly intuits this connection between sexuality, corporeality, and exaltation when he writes that "the sacredness of human sexuality, for Smith, was inseparable from the sacred mystery of embodiment, without which godhood would not be possible." And to the extent that Kushner uses *Angels in America* to present spiritual existence as essentially material, he argues, on the level of assumption if not on the level of conclusion, squarely on the side of the Mormons and in firm opposition to received notions of both traditional Christianity and normative Judaism.[17]

The same material equality between the human and the divine—and the resulting democratization of the cosmos—manifests itself in another way in *Angels in America* when Prior decides that he does not wish to accept the prophetic assignment given to him by the angel. In order to reject his prophetic calling, Prior must do something relatively familiar to both Mormons and Jews but almost inconceivable for most Catholics and Protestants: engage in a physical contest with a metaphysical being. On the advice of Hannah, Joe's Mormon mother who has become Prior's principal spiritual advisor, Prior approaches the angel, bests him in a wrestling match, and directly quotes Jacob's line from Genesis 32:26: "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (*P*, 119). Unknown to Prior (and almost certainly to Kushner as well), his action also contains a resounding echo from one of the patriarchs described in the Book of Mormon: the prophet Enos,

17. Though not, as Bloom would rush to point out, to the Christianity of the Gnostics or to the Judaism of the Kabbalah, which saw God as "essentially sexual" (106). The connection between the Kabbalism, Gnosticism, and early Mormonism is one of Bloom's favorite themes in *The American Religion*; in his opinion, "the God of Joseph Smith is a daring revival of the God of some of the Kabbalists and Gnostics, prophetic sages who, like Smith himself, asserted that they had returned to the true religion of Yahweh or Jehovah" (99). Bloom's suggestion that Smith had probably had some exposure to the Kabbala has recently been supported by D. Michael Quinn, in *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), who notes that, in June 1843 Alexander Neibauer, a Jewish convert to Mormonism residing in Nauvoo, Illinois, published two articles about the Kabbala's views of spiritual transmigration (639). According to Quinn, Smith's 1844 diary notes Neibauer's articles (643).

who had what he describes as a "wrestle" with the Lord in which he "Kneeled down before [his] maker and cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication" for an entire day and night. After this wrestle, the Lord tells Enos, "I will grant unto thee according to thy desires, because of thy faith" (Enos 4, 12). In an even more direct parallel to Mormonism, the same basic pattern of wrestling with a supernatural force before receiving a divine blessing is duplicated in Joseph Smith's account of his first vision. In Joseph's case, the struggle was with Satan, but it was a struggle that he had to endure before he could be visited by God and Jesus Christ:

> After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction (JS-H 1:15).

Despite their obvious differences, the stories of Jacob, Enos, Prior Walter, and Joseph Smith all follow the same structural lines: a prophet approaches a divine being, engages in a physical struggle that is described as a "wrestle," emerges victoriously, and receives a blessing. More to the point, these four individuals all refused to wait until God chose to bless them; they all took matters into their own hands, struggled with powers that seemed too great to overcome, and, through the strength of their convictions, received the divine intervention that they sought.

This metaphor of wrestling with the divine, I believe, forms an important part of Kushner's theological project in *Angels in America*: the play itself is, among other things, a struggle with God over the question of AIDS. During the Episcopalian National Day of Prayer for AIDS on 9 October 1994, Kushner delivered a lengthy prayer at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City. Throughout the prayer, which was later published in the book *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness*, Kushner repeatedly calls God's attention to the suffering that AIDS and other problems have caused in the world:

> Must grace fall so unevenly on the earth? Must goodness precipitate from sky to ground so infrequently? We are parched for goodness, we perish for lack of lively rain; there's a drought for want of grace, everywhere. Surely this has not escaped your notice? All life hesitates now, wondering: in the night which has descended, in the dry endless night that's fallen instead of the expected rain: Where are you?[18]

18. Tony Kushner, *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 220.

Compare this excerpt to a remarkably similar prayer offered 155 years earlier by Joseph Smith, who was suffering unjust imprisonment in the Liberty Jail while his people were being expelled from the state of Missouri under threat of extermination:

> O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place? How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries? Yea O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them? (D&C 121:1-3)

I find the similarity between these two prayers remarkable. Both Joseph Smith and Tony Kushner are, in their own way, wrestling with God on behalf of their suffering people, and this fact alone sets them apart from both traditional Christianity and normative Judaism—but not from the American Religion. In the European Religion, suffering is something that should be born, as Job bore it, with deference and resignation, and not something that should be questioned or challenged. In the American Religion of Joseph Smith and Tony Kushner, however, positive human action, such as the humble prayer of a fourteen-year-old seeker of truth, has a real chance of precipitating divine intervention; and human suffering, such as that caused by the terrible epidemic of AIDS, is therefore something that must be continuously called to God's attention in an attempt to secure an intervention or a response.

The second theological emphasis of *Angels in America* that I would like to discuss is the theology of history—particularly the theological history associated with the Marxist Jewish mystic Walter Benjamin. In his own public statements, Kushner has attributed to Benjamin a position of preeminence, along with Harold Bloom and Bertold Brecht, as one of the chief philosophical architects of *Angels in America*. In his longest published interview to date, Kushner speaks at length about Benjamin's classic essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," from which he learned that "you have to be constantly looking back at the rubble of history. The most dangerous thing is to become set upon some notion of the future that isn't rooted in the bleakest, most terrifying idea of what's piled up behind you." So great is Benjamin's influence on the play that the name of its most important character, Prior Walter, is, according to Kushner, a Benjaminian pun: the "prior" Walter is none other than Walter Benjamin.[19]

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin rejects the tradi-

19. Savran, 24-26.

tional Marxist/Hegelian position that history inexorably progresses towards a desired end. Instead, he argues, history is a random collection of catastrophes. He writes that "whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate," and that those who have benefitted from these actions have carefully constructed the twin myths of progress and historical determinism to conceal the consequences of their ascendancy.[20] The most memorable image Benjamin uses to illustrate his conception of history is Paul Klee's painting entitled "Angelus Novus"—a famous Marxist angel that, as much as the Angel Moroni, serves as the forerunner of Prior's divine visitor in *Angels in America*. Benjamin describes the Angel of History as follows:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling up wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is called progress.[21]

For Benjamin, history is nothing more than a movement from wreck to wreck, with progress, utopia, or paradise nowhere to be found. This catastrophe is written into history in much the same way that progress is written into the Hegelian version of the script; it is an inevitable part of historical existence. There is no salvation *within* history, only salvation *from* history—a salvation that will require a Messianic rupture of the fabric of the historical continuum itself.

The first part of the play *Millennium Approaches* promises precisely this kind of rupture in its very title, which mixes the Benjaminian notion of a disruption of history with a Christian notion of a second coming to produce the expectation of a significant—and entirely cataclysmic—historical event. Immediately before the angel crashes through the ceiling, one of the characters makes this promise explicit by stating that "history is about to crack wide open" (*MA*, 114). When this divine messenger finally arrives, we discover that her philosophy bears more than a little resemblance to Benjamin's theory of catastrophic history. In her exhortation to Prior, she issues the following anti-progress jeremiad to the human race:

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20. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schoken Books, 1968), 256.

21. Ibid., 257-58.

Forsake the Open Road:
Neither Mix nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow:
If you do not MINGLE you will cease to Progress:
Seek not to Fathom the World and its Delicate
Particle Logic.
You cannot Understand, you can only Destroy,
You do not Advance, you only Trample.
Poor blind Children, abandoned on the Earth,
Groping terrified, misguided, over
Fields of Slaughter, over bodies of the Slain:
HOBBLE YOURSELVES! (*P*, 52-53)

Though the angel that visits Prior echoes some of the words of the Angel Moroni, her actual bearing is much more in the image of the Klee painting: she is confused, chaotic, and desperately trying to stop the storm of progress that she perceives as the source of her misery. Yet, in much the same way that Benjamin offered more hope for the future of humanity than his colleagues in the Frankfurt School by holding up the possibility of some kind of Messianic rupture, Kushner holds up the possibility—though certainly not the guarantee—that human beings might actually figure out a way to work through their own problems—with or without a divine intervention. Ultimately, in fact, Kushner is both too traditional and too postmodern to accept Benjamin's conclusions without substantial modification. As a traditional liberal, Kushner still clings, albeit sometimes tenuously, to the notion that human beings can improve the world if they try hard enough; as a committed post-modernist, he cannot possibly reconcile himself to the existence of an ahistorical space from which history could be assaulted. Prior implies both of these positions when, in rejecting his prophetic calling, he states, "We can't just stop. We're not rocks—progress, migration, motion is . . . modernity. It's animate, its what living things do" (*P*, 132).

So how does Mormon theology fit into all of this convoluted Marxist historicism? Philosophically, Kushner is in a difficult position: he must attempt to theorize some version of historical change that acknowledges the possibility for positive action implicit in modern Hegelian versions of Marxist theory, while at the same time accounting for the hard lesson taught by Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School: that forward motion for its own sake can very often lead straight to disaster. I believe that Kushner attempts to reconcile his own political paradox by appealing to the conspicuously Mormon metaphors of disruption and migration. The name of the book that the angel gives Prior is "The Book of the Anti-Migratory Epistle" (*P*, 120); for her, as for all of the angels, the human impulse to migrate is at the root of our disastrous forward motion (*P*, 49). This emphasis on migration constructs the

angel in an immediate, recognizable opposition to Mormonism, for which "migration" is perhaps *the* key historical term. The Mormon trek across the plains is possibly the most well-known example of migration in American history—and Kushner has gone to great lengths to reproduce the pioneer experience in his play in the form of talking mannequins in an LDS visitor's center. One of these living mannequins, the Mormon Mother, comes to life and comforts Harper after Joe declares his homosexuality and leaves her. In response to the question, "How do people change?" the Mormon Mother responds with one of the play's most profound philosophical observations:

> God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in, he grabs hold of your bloody tubes and they slip to evade his grasp but he squeezes hard, he insists, he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching (*P*, 79).

Kushner has stated that the second part of *Angels in America* "is a play about the difficulties of change," and nowhere are these difficulties better stated than in this brief speech by the homespun pioneer woman. The Mormon Mother's view of personal change, I believe, directly equates with the author's view, not only of individual change, but of historical and social progress: society can change, but only with a great deal of suffering, and as much as we may need to progress, we cannot ignore the consequences of our forward motion; there is nothing to guarantee that a change from a bad situation will actually produce improvement, but, because of our natures, we must attempt to change anyway, despite the risk. With these sentiments, Kushner proposes a theology of history that, while not exactly rosy, does manage to avoid the shortcomings of both of the other systems presented in the play. A principal problem with the Hegelian model of history is that it ignores the human suffering that occurs in the name of progress; a principal problem with the Benjaminian model is that it does not allow for any real progress (barring that of a Messianic rupture) no matter how much one may struggle. Kushner's position in *Angels in America* can best be described as an uneasy synthesis of the two positions. Forward motion, Kushner seems to suggest, is possible, but not easy, and never predetermined; and real progress requires that we keep one eye always on the possibility of a better future and the other firmly fixed upon the catastrophic wreckage of the past.

By constructing a philosophy of history that is decidedly theological but completely non-deterministic, Kushner also paves the way for us to examine one more conspicuously Mormon by-product of his play: an emphasis on meaningful human agency. Actually, both of the main areas

that I have discussed so far—the uncreated nature of the human soul and the non-deterministic nature of forward progress—bear directly upon the question of agency. If every aspect of the human consciousness was created by God, then there can be no such thing as free agency, since our ability to react in any situation would have to have been completely predetermined. Similarly, if history marches inexorably towards a fixed, predestined conclusion, then agency cannot be meaningful, since nothing we do can alter the inevitable trajectory. In constructing a theology that rejects both of these common religious premises, Kushner lays the foundation for a meaningful concept of both human agency and human accountability.

Latter-day Saints have always taught the importance of free agency, which, according to Mormon doctrine, was the main point of contention in the War in Heaven referred to in the Book of Revelation (12:7-9). According to this belief, Satan, in a pre-mortal council of spirit intelligences proposed to ensure universal salvation by denying individual agency, and won the support of a third of the Hosts of Heaven. The remaining two-thirds, including everybody who has ever lived or ever will live on Earth, accepted both the blessings and the constraints of free agency and defeated Satan and his followers. Joseph Fielding Smith has written that agency is fundamental to, and inseparable from, Mormonism's Plan of Salvation:

> The Lord gave to man his free agency in the pre-existence. This great gift of agency, that is the privilege given to man to make his own choice, has never been revoked, and it never will be. It is an eternal principle giving freedom of thought and action to every soul. No person, by any decree of the Father, has ever been compelled to do good; no person has ever been forced to do evil. Each may act for himself. It was Satan's plan to destroy this agency and force men to do his will. There could be no satisfactory existence without this great gift.

In the same passage, Smith concludes that the reason agency is such a fundamental part of the human experience is so that "righteous rewards may be given and proper punishment be meted out to the transgressor."[22] The implication of these words is clear: it is only through what the vast majority of the Christian world would call a radical principle of free agency that a just God could possibly hold humans accountable for their actions.

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22. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1958), 2:20. For basic Mormon accounts of the War in Heaven, and of the role that free agency played in it, see Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 750-51; LeGrand Richard's *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976), 275-76; and Joseph Fielding Smith's *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:64-66.

Ultimately, this same issue of accountability is at the heart of Kushner's critique of historical determinism; the willingness to accept both individual agency and personal accountability separates the heroes from the villains throughout the play. This dynamic first manifests itself early on, when Louis is speaking with a rabbi at his grandmother's funeral and attempting to rationalize his impending decision to leave Prior. When the rabbi asks why a person would abandon a loved one in a time of great need, Louis fails to accept any responsibility for the choice; instead, he attempts to blame history: "Maybe this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time . . . maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of how things are supposed to go" (*MA*, 25). With this passage, Kushner demonstrates what I believe to be one of the play's central theses: a faulty view of history—one view that replaces human agency with metaphysical determinism—can cause basically good people to commit horrible atrocities in the name of progress. The same kind of misplaced faith in historical determinism that causes Louis to leave Prior is, according to Benjamin, responsible for the rise, or at lest the tolerance, of National Socialism in Germany. "One reason why fascism has a chance," Benjamin writes, "is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history that gives rise to it is untenable."[23]

Nearly every other character that the play identifies as unsympathetic similarly attempts to use history to mitigate agency and, therefore, responsibility. When Joe announces that he his going to leave Harper, he tells her that "my whole life has conspired to bring me to this place, and I can't despise my whole life" (*MA*, 78). When Joe tries to convince Louis that leaving Prior was not a sin, he says, "The rhythm of history is conservative. . . . You must accept that. And accept what is rightfully yours" (*P*, 35). And even Joe's mentor, Roy Cohen, the closeted conservative power broker who is easily the most despicable person in the play, justifies his greed and corruption by sneering, "I am not moved by the unequal distribution of goods on this earth. It's history, I didn't write it" (*P*, 60).

Kushner himself, however, will not countenance these evasions. If we accept the theology of *Angels in America*, we cannot blame history, cre-

23. Benjamin, 257; emphasis in original.

ation, fate, or destiny for the way we are; when we sin we must acknowledge our accountability, accept the consequences, which is almost exactly what Belize, the African-American drag queen who often serves as the play's moral conscience, tells Louis after he leaves Prior: "I've thought about it for a very long time, and I still don't understand what love is. Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the law of love" (*MA*, 100).

The theme of moral accountability colors the play until its final scenes. Prior ultimately refuses to accept Louis back, and Louis has to accept the consequences of having violated "the law of love"; Roy Cohen must pay for his sins throughout the play: he is tormented by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, a woman he illegally had executed in the 1950s, who, moments before he dies, informs him that he has been disbarred. But it is Joe Pitt who must suffer the most severe consequences; after Louis discovers that Joe has written a number of ultra-conservative, anti-gay legal decisions for his employer, Louis viciously berates him, and Kushner abandons him to suffer for his sins. Nearly every Mormon critic who has written about *Angels in America* has commented on the play's unfair treatment of Joe in the end.[24] I would argue, however, that this treatment is necessary in order for Kushner to be true to one of the most fundamentally Mormon tenets advanced by the play: the principle of free agency implies moral accountability. In Kushner's eyes, Joe has committed a grave sin by writing legal decisions assaulting the rights of homosexuals; therefore, he must accept the consequences of his actions and pay for his sins. Fortunately for gay Mormon Republican lawyers everywhere, Kushner has already announced that Joe "will ultimately be redeemable in *Angels* part three."[25]

If my arguments about the theology of *Angels in America* have been correct, then we should be able to identify at least the following five

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24. In his otherwise effusive review for *Dialogue*, David Pace complains that "not everything about Kushner's American epic is satisfying" because "Joe Pitt is entirely dismissed from the core of enlightened individuals who gather around the Central Park fountain." Pace concludes that this exclusion represents an "unfair demonizing of Joe" (196-97). Evenden is even more severe, seeing Kushner's final resolution as one in which "all forms of good and evil finally coalesce into a few images" and in which the playwright is "militant and unforgiving of everyone that [he] finds lacking" (62). Colleen McDannell, in her presentation at the 1994 Sunstone Symposium, employs Catholic terminology to offer a slightly less severe reading of Joe's final position: Roy Cohen, as the play shows, goes to hell, while the play's final community of Prior, Belize, Hannah, and Louis, she argues, represents heaven; Joe, then ends up in neither place, but in Purgatory, where he must purge himself of his sins before finally being redeemed (taped panel discussion #334, "Mormons and Mormonism in Kushner's *Angels in America*").

25. Savran, 103.

propositions as beliefs that Kushner advocates throughout the play:

> (1) Human beings have an indestructible essence that was not created by God but is coeternal with him, making human nature itself something that is always already precious, sacred, and divine.
> (2) Material existence is inherently spiritual, which implies that the body is an inherent part of the soul and that bodily suffering (such as that caused by AIDS) is spiritually damaging.
> (3) The relationship between humans and God is sufficiently democratic that it is possible to "wrestle with God" in order to attempt to secure his intervention.
> (4) Every human being has an essential agency that cannot be mitigated or qualified in any way.
> (5) We are entirely accountable for how we use our agency and must suffer the consequences if we misuse it.

Two things should be readily apparent from this list. First, I would argue that it is recognizably Mormon. I do not mean by this that all of the points on the list are uniquely Mormon—since any one of them, in one form or another, could be found somewhere in the beliefs of other world religions; however, it would be difficult to locate another religion—especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition—that did not view at least one or two of the points as damnable heresies. Taken as a group of theological postulates, this list contains doctrines that are found together so frequently in Mormonism, and so infrequently in any other theological system, that it would not be inaccurate to refer to it as "essentially Mormon."

The second thing that should be evident from this list of religious precepts is that they form the basis for a genuine theology of social activism. By stressing the spiritual nature of material existence, Kushner makes a case for the spiritual damage caused by the AIDS virus and other manifestations of physical pain. For Kushner, material suffering is a spiritual concern that we must respond to by praying to, yearning for, and wrestling with God for a cure, as Prior does when he wrestles with the Angel, and as Kushner himself did when he offered his own public supplications on the National Prayer Day for AIDS in 1994. But for Kushner, prayer and supplication are not enough. We can invite God to intervene on our behalf, he implies, but we cannot wait around for such an intervention to happen; we must use our agency to solve the problems ourselves, or suffer the consequences if we fail. We should, I believe, place Kushner's emphasis on agency and accountability into this context. By emptying history of all teleological determinism, Kushner suggests that everything human beings do has genuine consequences; we cannot blame history for our failures, nor can we rely on it for our solutions. By elevating humanity to a divine status, he suggests that we have both the right and the responsibility to create solutions to our own problems. But

Kushner also warns that revolutionary action must be slow and carefully thought out, or it may lead to unexpected disaster, since the agency to act well necessarily implies the agency to act poorly. Perhaps Kushner imported the character Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov into the opening scene of *Perestroika* for the sole purpose of warning would-be revolutionaries against well-meaning but insufficiently theorized social change (*P,* 13-15).[26]

In the concluding lines of his prayer at St. John's Episcopal Church, Kushner gives as direct a statement of his personal religious philosophy as I have been able to find anywhere in his writings:

> When I was ten, an uncle told me you didn't exist: "We descend from apes," he said, "the universe will end, and there is no God." I believed the ape part—my uncle had thick black hair on his arms and knuckles, so apes was easy—and the universe became a nulliverse, so that was scary and fun. And since his well meaning instruction I have not *known* your existence, as some friends of mine do; but you have left bread-crumb traces inside of me. Rapacious birds swoop down and the traces are obscured, but the path is recoverable. It can be discovered again.[27]

Part of Kushner's project in *Angels in America,* I believe, is to rediscover the path to God; but doing so, for the author, requires a thorough reimagination of received religious traditions. In many respects, Mormonism, as Tony Kushner presents it in the play, is part of the problem: it is an overly institutionalized, guilt-producing, conservative religion that stands in the way of meaningful social change. There is another level, though, which I would call the deep theological level, in which Mormonism is part of the solution, for if *Angels in America* can be said to have a theology at all, it is a theology that, while not overtly Mormon, has more than enough recognizably Mormon elements to make it worthy of the attention of any Latter-day Saint scholar or critic.

In making such a claim, I realize that I am begging some very significant questions about influence. I am not, of course, arguing that Kushner

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26. The character Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the world's oldest living Bolshevik, is one of the principal characters in Kushner's short play, *Slavs!,* which is reprinted on pp. 87-105 of the collection *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness.* In this later play Prelapsarianov stands between two other Soviet characters, Upgobkin, who represents the impulse towards unrestrained progress, and Popolitpov, who stands for blind conservatism. In the introduction to *Slavs!,* Kushner makes it clear that he intends for Prelapsarianov to be a synthesis between the other two equally dangerous positions (95). The speech that Aleksii gives at the beginning of *Perestroika* (13-14) is taken almost directly from a similar speech in *Slavs!* (108). I believe that Prelapsarianov represents in both plays what I take to be Kushner's own position on radical change: it is possible but extremely dangerous and should only be attempted with a great deal of cautious consideration.

27. *Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness,* 223.

is a secret Mormon, or even that he is especially sympathetic towards the Latter-day Saints. To date, Kushner's public statements about Mormonism have tended to be good-natured but condescending. Mormons may be "right-wing and horrible," he states, but at least "there's something dear and nice about them." And while he finds our faith "moving," he believes our cosmology to be "naive," "disingenuous," and "dumb."[28] But even though Tony Kushner the public speaker may have little respect for Mormon theology, I believe that Tony Kushner the author has not hesitated to appropriate numerous elements of that theology into the religious infrastructure of his play. Much of this appropriation comes directly from Bloom's *The American Religion*, but I believe that the Mormon element of *Angels in America* is more complex than a mere popularization of Bloom's book would allow. Ultimately, Kushner has taken on a project that requires him to reimagine the history of Judeo-Christian religion in an unambiguously American, decidedly twentieth-century context. There are very few precedents for revolutionizing 3,000 years of established religion, and, among Americans, Joseph Smith is undoubtedly the best model available. Thus, I would argue, Kushner has included many elements of Mormon theology in *Angels in America*, not because he initially set out to do so, but because his effort to reinvent the foundations of traditional religion required him to appropriate, both consciously and unconsciously, from the most successful attempt of any previous American to do the same. Kushner's own theological project demonstrates, as Bloom has already written, that "there is something of Joseph Smith's spirit in every manifestation of the American Religion."[29]

28. Savran, 102-103.
29. Bloom, 127.