

Angels In America: Relation to Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures

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Tony Kushner's "Angels In America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes" has been heralded since its theatrical incarnation which began in 1990. An epic two-part play (Part 1: Millennium Approaches and Part 2: Perestroika) was assembled into a six part, six-hour mini-series for the Home Box Office network in 2003. While many of the discussions about the work have centered on the confrontation of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) and the examination of its Mormon (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, LDS) characters, the concept of prophets is also a central point of the work. While there is a correlation to the prophets of the LDS religion, the connection to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures is greater.

The main character of the work, Prior Walter, is a homosexual male who is suffering from AIDS and has been visited by an angel that informs him that he is a prophet. Before this visitation, Prior has had an earlier vision (that he dismisses as a fever-induced nightmare) of ancestors who inform him that he comes from a long line of prophets. The final scene of Part One the appearance of the Angel, along with the information that is presented to Prior, is confusing and terrifying to him.

"PRIOR: Please. Please. Whatever you are, I don't understand this visitation, I'm not a prophet, I'm a sick, lonely man, I don't understand what you want from me. Stop moving. That's what you want Answer me! You want me dead.

ANGEL: No more.

PRIOR: I. WANT. You to go away. I'm tired to death of being done to, walked out on, *infected*, fucked over and *now* tortured by some mixed-up, reactionary angel, some...

ANGEL: You can't Outrun your Occupation, Jonah. Hiding from Me one place you will

find me in another.”¹

The dialogue between the Angel and Prior is echoed in a passage of Jonah 4:1-3 (NRSV), “1 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3 And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'”

Like many of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, Prior neither wants, nor is willing to accept the role of the prophet, and looks to escape it. The continuing exchange with the Angel reveals more symbols of Prior’s call to be a prophet. “...while Prior—good modern soul—still refuses to acknowledge what is happening as anything but a dream, even while the dialogue reminds us of the import of biblical dreaming.”² Just as prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures experienced dreams and visions, this modern prophet (Prior) is experiencing his own interaction with the Divine.

The majority of the symbolic links to the prophets of Hebrew Scriptures and to the character of Prior Walter are more apparent in Part Two of the play and in the sixth part of the miniseries. As Prior continues to struggle with his call to being a prophet, he comes into contact with the mother of the gay Mormon lawyer Joe Pitt, Hanna Pitt. Prior knows who she is, and knows that her son is gay, because Joe has become involved

¹ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part One: Millennium Approaches* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 45-46.

² Anthony Lioi, "The Grest Work Begins: Theater as Theurgy in *Angels in America*," *Cross Currents* 54, no. 3 (September 2004): 109.

with Prior's former lover Louis Ironson. Hanna and Prior's paths cross as she helps him to the hospital, as his AIDS has taken a turn for the worst. After he has been checked over by the nurse, Prior begins to engage Hanna in a personal discussion about his experience with the Angel. He then reaches out to her and her knowledge of the Bible.

"PRIOR: The prophets in the Bible, do they... ever refuse their vision?

HANNAH: There's scriptural precedent, yes.

PRIOR: And what does God do to them? When they do that?

HANNAH: He... Well, he feeds them to whales."³

This is in direct reference to Jonah 1:17 (NRSV), "But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." While this becomes a humorous exchange in both the play and the mini-series, it underlines the seriousness of what happens to prophets who do not respond to the duty that God has called them to do. While this exact fate does not befall to Prior, it is a link to the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.

One of the many symptoms of AIDS is the appearance of Kaposi's sarcoma, a blood vessel tumor that appears on the skin. One could draw a parallel to Job 2:7 (NRSV), "So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." Job's affliction did not cause him to depart from God though. Prior however views it as another reason to reject his calling.

"PRIOR: Look at this... horror. *(He lifts his shirt; his torso is spotted with three or four*

³ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 103.

lesions) See? That's not human. That's why I run. Wouldn't you? Wouldn't anybody.

HANNAH: It's a cancer. Nothing more. Nothing more human than that.

PRIOR: Oh God, I want to be done."⁴

Hannah's statement is somewhat shocking because of her matter-of-fact sentiment, and even more shocking in the mini-series is that she does not recoil from the lesions, but actually touches one. This is a modern reaction to a disease, especially in contrast to the early days of AIDS when there were many theories of how the disease was spread. Viewing this through the lens of Mosaic Laws, someone with lesions would be out-casts and it would be viewed as a punishment from God. One can experience this viewpoint in a modern setting from Biblical literalists who have created billboards and literature stating, "AIDS – God's Judgment Has Come." So, Hannah's actions go against what Prior would have expected, and even what the audience would expect, from her perceived theological views. This interaction helps create a bond between these two characters; which leads them to share their stories of seeing angels and other stories of prophets.

The strongest link to a prophet of Hebrew Scripture is that of Jacob.

Genesis 32:24-32(NRSV), "24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 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. 30 So Jacob

⁴ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 103.

called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. 32 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."

This section of Hebrew Scriptures provides the framework for a climatic scene of the play. Prior has rejected his role as a prophet and is lying in a hospital room and the Angel has returned. However, she is no longer an angel dressed in white informing him of his prophetic duty, but an angel that is filled with fury about his rejection of that duty. Her wings and dress are jet black and her dialogue is filled with angry shrieking. She has come to deal with Prior. Both Prior and Hannah are terrified and Prior once again seeks help from Hannah.

"PRIOR: You said scriptural precedent, you said... WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO...

HANNAH: You... you... wrestle her.

PRIOR: SAY *WHAT*?

HANNAH: It's an angel, you ... just ... grab hold and say... oh what was it, wait, wait, umm... OH! Grab her, say "I will not let thee go except thou bless me!" Then wrestle with her till she gives in."⁵

Prior engages the angel and does prevail. As a sign of his winning the struggle a flaming ladder descends from the heavens in the mini-series, and a similar ladder is described in the stage directions of the play. This is another connection to Jacob and one of his visions. Genesis 28:12 (NRSV), "And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending

⁵ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 116.

and descending on it.” The scene then returns to the previous scriptural reference and injects some humor into the scene, by making reference to Genesis 32:32.

“ANGEL: Now release me. I have torn a muscle in my thigh.

PRIOR: Big deal, my leg’s been hurting for months.”⁶

Prior’s final link to Jacob is seen in the final scene of the play and the mini-series. Prior’s physicality is described in the stage directions, “*Prior is heavily bundled, and he has thick glasses on, and he supports himself with a cane.*”⁷ The limp and the cane tie Prior’s current condition to Jacob and his limp; that they both received from their experiences with angels.

While the connections to prophets can be easily drawn from Hebrew Scriptures, they may be lost on many modern viewers of *Angels*. Unless the person has had prior experience within the Judaic Religion, or has grown up in the Christian tradition these links might not be made. If the viewer has some knowledge, the finer details of these links might not always be fully remembered. Even in the case of the Kaposi’s sarcoma, one may not immediately see a link to the suffering of a Hebrew Scripture prophet, because that condition has become so painfully equated with those people suffering from AIDS. However, the connections are not needed to show that Prior is a prophet, but it does bring another layer of understanding to the work and brings forward deeply spiritual and religious connotations.

Tony Kushner is an admitted atheist and a Marxist, but he still holds the ideas of

⁶ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 117.

⁷ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 143.

spirituality important and an important part of this work. "Given, then, that the playwright will not authorize an anti-spiritual reading of *Angels*, that he sees no contradiction between its sexual, political, and religious orientations..."⁸ For Kushner, the elements of sex, politics and religion all blend together to create this work and these characters who inhabit that world. They are characters that are living in a world that has been broken by disease, political ideas that have proven false, and a religion that doesn't always fit into their lives. The character Louis Ironson describes himself as an "... intensely secular Jew"⁹ when he is asked to say the Kaddish, the Jewish Prayer of Mourning. The characters of Joe, Harper, and Hannah Pitt have become conflicted in their Mormon beliefs because of many of their experiences in the play. The struggles of relationship to the spiritual, religion, and with God reflect back to prophets like Moses and Hosea who struggled in similar ways.

Still many of these characters are trying to do the good and proper thing throughout the play, or at least what they consider is good. Anthony Lioi in his article "The Great Work Begins: Theater as Theurgy in "Angels in America" views the play through the lens of Jewish spirituality related to Biblical prophecy and the Kabbalah. "Theurgy, which literally means 'god-work,' is a spiritual practice based on the belief that the performance of *mitzvot*, or good works mandated by Torah, actually changes the nature of God, empowering his merciful aspect to heal the Creation, whose brokenness

⁸ Anthony Lioi, "The Grest Work Begins: Theater as Theurgy in Angels in America.," *Cross Currents* 54, no. 3 (September 2004): 98.

⁹ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 122.

reflects God's own wounds.”¹⁰ The character Belize steals a supply of AZT (an early treatment for those with AIDS) from the character Roy Cohn after he dies, with plans to give the pills to those who can't afford them. Before Belize has Louis smuggle the pills out of the hospital he asks him to say the Kaddish for Roy, which Louis is opposed to doing for him. This is Belize's attempt to allow good to come out of a broken situation. The character of Roy Cohn was known for many terrible acts, but he is providing to those he persecuted a gift of AZT and therefore needs to be honored in a religiously symbolic way.

“BELIZE: Louis, I'd even pray for you.

He was a terrible person. He died a hard death, So maybe... A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at least. Isn't that what the Kaddish asks for?”¹¹

That kind of forgiveness is seen in the final verse of the book of Job. God accepted Job's prayer and then restored all that had been taken away from him with twice of what he had before. While Belize cannot restore Roy, nor is Roy like one of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, Belize is looking to help heal the brokenness that AIDS has caused to many of his friends, including Prior (who has shared his story of the Angel and his visions with Belize). While Belize did not truly believe in the visions that Prior shared, he did offer a sacrifice like those who spoke against Job and were proven

¹⁰ Anthony Lioi, "The Grest Work Begins: Theater as Theurgy in *Angels in America*," *Cross Currents* 54, no. 3 (September 2004): 97.

¹¹ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 122.

wrong.

Hannah was able to share with Prior her knowledge of the Bible and the story of Joseph Smith Jr., the founder of Mormonism, and his encounter with an angel. However, these were just stories to her. While she might have believed them and had faith in the truth of the stories, it did not make her encounter with the Angel in the play any less terrifying and otherworldly. After Prior has wrestled the Angel and ascended the ladder to Heaven to make his denouncement of being a prophet complete, the Angel turns her attention to Hannah. "What? What? You've got no business with me, I didn't call you, you're *his* fever dream not mine, and he's gone now and you should go too, I'm waking up right... NOW!"¹² Hannah's fear is again a reflection of many prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures who cower at the encounters with the Divine. Silently the Angel continues to approach Hannah and Hannah in turn begins to approach the Angel. The Angel then kisses Hannah and Hannah has an experience that is not only sexual, but also symbolically transformative. The effect of this transformation is shown in a scene that is not in the play, but in the mini-series where Hannah is returning to Joe's apartment and encounters a group of Quakers singing "Shall We Gather at the River?" This may signal perhaps another baptism has occurred in her life. As Hannah encounters Joe heading to work, she speaks with him in a more caring way, and as a physical gesture shares that she will be making dinner and it will be ready when he comes home from work. She is no longer the harsh, stern mother that was portrayed earlier. Her stiffness and coldness toward Joe have melted away after her encounter with the Angel.

¹² Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 117-118.

A viewer of *Angels in America* is not required to know the references to Hebrew Scriptures to understand or even enjoy the story. What they may experience is a story of Prior Walter and his struggles with being called to be a prophet, as well as experiencing the other story lines. The same could be said of the Hebrew Scriptures with its many stories of personal, cultural, and political struggles. This point is highlighted in Liliana M. Nutu's article for *Biblical Interpretation*, "What Kushner's *Angel's* demonstrates successfully is that biblical texts have been, are and always will be culturally mediated."¹³ So, as a person becomes engaged in the story of these characters that Kushner has created, they are transported to a different time and a different understanding of the world they occupy. The original productions of the play landed early in the battle of the AIDS epidemic in North America. This created a different tone and a different effect upon its audiences. By the time that the mini-series aired on HBO in 2003, new medications were available to help control the HIV virus and it was no longer an immediate death sentence that led directly to AIDS. So, the message of *Angels* was viewed differently once again. Just as the stories of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures are mediated in today's society, so is the story of Prior Walter.

However an understanding of Hebrew Scriptures and the prophets of that time would give a viewer of *Angels* a connection to a deeper tradition and a deeper story. When one can equate the suffering and struggles of Prior to the prophets that have gone before him, we see his struggles as not just those of a person struggling with

¹³ Liliana M. Nutu, "Angels in America and smiotic cocktails of sex, Bible and politics," *Biblical Interpretation* 14, no. 1-2 (January 2006): 185.

AIDS, but as one who struggles with the Divine. Prior is no longer separated from the audience because of his sexuality, his HIV status, or his personal situation. The viewer may identify with him on their own level of their struggles with the Divine. This does not mean that a viewer cannot resonate with Prior on more than one level, but it does offer them a chance to find something that they share in common.

Just as a viewer can now resonate with Prior in one or more of his struggles, a reader can then begin to find points of resonance with the prophets of Hebrew Scriptures. This disconnect of our current lives to those of the prophets may lessen when we begin to view their stories as something that could happen in our modern times. While the development of science and empirical theory has changed many of the myths that were believed during the time of the writing of the Hebrew Scriptures, these advances do not discount the stories of interaction between humans and their surrounding society.

There are times in the Hebrew Scriptures that God leaves the Israelites, while God has abandoned humanity completely in *Angels*. Even though God left the Israelites, their story continued. It ultimately becomes the story of those communities that responded to the prophets and how that response shaped the lives they shared. The community that was created around Prior was changed and responded to him in a way that he did not expect from the beginning of *Angels*. A lover who deserts him, an Angel who challenges him, a stranger who cares for him, and a friend that always is concerned about him. The final scene is one of all these characters, though the angel is represented as a statue at the Bethesda Fountain in New York City's Central Park,

gathered to share in a different story. They share about the story of Bethesda (Beth-zatha) from John 5:2, and the healing waters. The characters are now no longer tied to the Hebrew Scriptures, because Hannah has once again shared a story with Prior, and have moved into the hope of the Gospels.

The saga ends by Prior revealing himself having accepted his role as a prophet. “You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

And I bless you: *More Life*.

The Great Work Begins.”¹⁴

The blessing of “more life” that Prior asked for after he wrestled with the Angel is the blessing that he bestows upon everyone. He then makes the prophetic statement, “The Great Work Begins” and the play/mini-series ends. Just like the prophets Hebrew Scriptures fulfilled their calling, so has Prior, and the characters depart to continue living.

¹⁴ Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, Part Two: Perestroika* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) 146.

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