

# Covenants, Kinship, and Caring for the Destitute in the Book of Amos

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At the outset of the book of Amos, the Old Testament prophet captures the attention of the ancient Israelites when he condemns the inhabitants of Tyre, a port city north of Israel often used synonymously to reference the Phoenicians, for not remembering “the brotherly covenant” (Amos 1:9), or as it appears in a different translation, “the covenant of kinship” (Amos 1:9 NRSV).<sup>1</sup> The Israelites easily recognized and eagerly accepted this condemnation because they were the victims of the covenantal breach from one of their neighboring regional powers.<sup>2</sup> Amos, however, did not travel from the southern kingdom of Judah to speak comfort to the ears of the Israelites. Instead, the prophet uses the condemnation of Tyre, as well as the condemnations of other surrounding nations cited in Amos 1–2, as a subtle and persuasive introduction to the condemnation he was about to pronounce upon Israel’s social elite for their own forgetfulness of the covenant of kinship toward their fellow Israelites.

An understanding of the relationship between covenants and kinship in the world of the Old Testament has powerful implications when discussing the need to care for the disadvantaged and marginalized, especially when focusing on a society built on covenants that aimed to forge kinship relationships. Biblical scholar Frank Moore Cross observes that one of the central purposes of all covenant making in the ancient Near East was the creation of kinship.<sup>3</sup> Thus, at the heart of covenant making is “the obligation of the kinsman to uphold the welfare of his fellow kinsman.”<sup>4</sup> Put another way, the Israelites were under covenant to “open [their] hand wide unto [their] brother” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Amos leverages this understanding of kinship through covenants and utilizes kinship language throughout his writings when he refers to the family of Israel (Amos 3:1) and their inter-related positions as daughters, sons, brothers, children, wives, and fathers.<sup>5</sup> Amos employs these terms to remind his audiences of their covenantal kinship to one another, regardless of social, religious, or economic status.

Kinship created by covenants plays a central role in the law given to the Israelites through Moses (Leviticus 25). Additionally, Israel and the surrounding nations had entered formal covenants of kinship through treaties during the days of David and Solomon (2 Samuel 5:11; 1 Kings 5:26; 9:13; and 16:31). In the days of Amos’s ministry (760–750 BC), it appears these covenants had been disregarded not only by Israel’s neighbors, but by the Israelites themselves, prompting “roars from Zion” intent on bringing destruction to the covenant breakers (Amos 1:2 NRSV).<sup>6</sup> The consequences of forgetting the covenant of kinship, however, had not yet arrived, and the Israelite society bore no marks of such destruction. Instead, the Israelites were enjoying an era of peace and prosperity (2 Kings 14:23–29). In this golden age of the divided monarchy, Amos reprimands the elite of Israelite society for their exploitation of the destitute for personal gain and prophesies concerning the consequences that loom on the horizon because they will not remember their kinship covenants.

Although scholars overwhelmingly recognize the prophet's call for social justice as the central theme of his work,<sup>7</sup> they cite Amos 5:21–24 to bring into question the unity of Amos's writings with Jewish law, arguing that there is a dichotomy between orthodoxy (correct worship/belief) and orthopraxy (correct action) in the prophet's writings.<sup>8</sup> The message of Amos, however, reconciles both orthodoxy and orthopraxy in ancient Israel when studied through covenants of kinship. To demonstrate this coherency, I will first explore how covenants in the ancient world created kinship and discuss how such covenants included mechanisms to care for the destitute in the ancient society. This will provide needed context to Amos's oracles against the nations (Amos 1–2) and his indictments and visions against Israel (Amos 3–9). Additionally, this context will show how the elite in Israel, and to a lesser extent her neighboring nations, were guilty of breaking the covenants by not only neglecting the poor, needy, and destitute but taking advantage of them for their own personal gain, prompting the condemnation and destruction foretold by Amos. In conclusion, I will reflect on how covenants in the Restoration, particularly those associated with baptism, the law of consecration, and temple sealings, comprise modern-day covenants of kinship among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Contemporizing the message of Amos reminds us that we are also under covenant to aid the poor and needy, especially in times of peace and prosperity, and warns of the stark consequences that await us if we do not.

## **The Covenants of Kinship in the World of the Old Testament**

While the phrase *covenant of kinship* appears only in Amos 1:9, covenants and kinship were at the heart of ancient Near Eastern society. As noted biblical scholar Jonathan Klawans has observed, “Hard-and-fast distinction between ritual<sup>9</sup> and ethics has prevented scholars from appreciating the degree to which ritual and ethics are inherently

connected—and virtually inseparable.”<sup>10</sup> To illustrate the inseparable nature of the concept of covenants and kinship in the world of the Old Testament, it is necessary to first outline the linguistic and cultural context for the words *kinship* and *covenant* as they appear in Amos 1:9. The Hebrew term translated as “brotherly” or “kinship” in this verse is *’akhim* (אָחִים). When joined with *covenant* (*bərīt* בְּרִית), the term is a specific reference to one’s “duty towards tribal kinsmen.”<sup>11</sup> Anthropologist Meyer Fortes refers to the kinship suggested by this context as an “ethic of generosity” in which “kinsfolk are expected to be loving, just, and generous to one another and not to demand strictly equivalent returns of one another.”<sup>12</sup>

In the world of the Old Testament, covenants that create kinship can be categorized in three forms: familial, temporal, and divine. Familial covenants of kinship are the result of a shared parentage or lineage. Temporal covenants of kinship are the result of oaths and treaties made between nation-states or societal leaders with the intent to strengthen political alliances and dissuade against conflict. Divine covenants of kinship are the result of the acceptance of a religious law through formal rites that emphasize one’s shared equality with others of the covenant in the eyes of deity. Kinship obtained through a shared lineage is the result of the familial units created by covenants made between husbands and wives that transfer to their posterity. Kinship through temporal and divine means, however, is associated with the Hebrew term *bərīt* (בְּרִית), usually translated as “covenant,” “contract,” or “agreement.”<sup>13</sup> Cross argues that *bərīt* is related to various words in Akkadian, Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew that are translated as “covenant, treaty, or oath.”<sup>14</sup> However, such translations fail to portray the full range of meaning for the term within an ancient context. Johannes Pedersen states that these words go beyond the mere action or ceremony of a covenant in the ancient world, but instead portray “the relationship between those who belong together with all the rights and obligations which spring from this relationship. It encompasses consequently both the relationship between those related by kinship and those united by covenant.”<sup>15</sup>

Amos alludes to each of these forms of covenants of kinship in his writings. A brief historical background of each form of the covenants of kinship is helpful to understand the underlying covenants that were breached by the Israelites and their neighbors that led to Amos's pronouncement of condemnations.

### *Covenantal kinship through lineage*

Sharing lineage presupposes a covenant of kinship and is readily evident from the beginning of the Old Testament. The Lord's commandment to Adam and Eve to "become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24) was not merely a reference to their marriage relationship, but a reference to "the offspring they produce, who share their 'flesh.'" The birth of every child illustrates the biological and social connectedness of humankind.<sup>16</sup> In other words, because of the covenants made by Adam and Eve with one another regarding their marital relationship, their offspring were covenantal kin. This type of covenantal kinship through lineage is emphasized in the biblical text with references describing the kinship between the descendants of Jacob and the descendants of Esau, known as the Edomites (Numbers 20:14; Deuteronomy 2:4; and Obadiah 10, 12). Commenting on the kinship context of these verses, Peter C. Craigie observes that the children of Israel viewed the descendants of Esau with relative equanimity.<sup>17</sup>

This view of the Edomites is preserved in the writings of Amos as he refers to the actions of the descendants of Esau involving pursuing "his *brother* with the sword," and casting "off all pity" (Amos 1:11, emphasis added). The phrase translated as "cast off all pity" in the King James Version of the Bible is difficult to decipher in the original Hebrew. While on the surface it does not appear to make direct reference to the kinship between Jacob and Esau, the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint) reads, "and violated his (own) womb" (1:11 New English Translation of the Septuagint), which has led one translator to take liberties in translating the Hebrew as "violated his obligations of kinship."<sup>18</sup> By directly referencing the shared national lineage of the people of Edom and

Israel, the authors of the Old Testament emphasize the covenant of kinship that was inherent by birth.<sup>19</sup>

### *Covenantal kinship through temporal treaties*

Covenantal kinship is also formed by temporal oaths and treaties agreed to by nation-states and societal leaders. Examples of these covenants of kinship are found throughout the Old Testament as the nation-state of Israel navigated its relationship with neighboring nations.<sup>20</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a lengthy recitation of the history of temporal covenantal kinships created by Israel, but some are of specific interest to our discussion on the book of Amos. Amos mentions six nation-states that entered one (or more) of the temporal covenants of kinship with Israel: Aram (Syria), Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, and Moab (Amos 1:3–2:1). While Edom's relationship to Israel is primarily based on shared national lineage (Amos 1:11),<sup>21</sup> Israel made covenants with Phoenicia (1 Kings 5:12), Ammon (2 Samuel 10:2), Aram (2 Samuel 8:6), and Moab (2 Samuel 8:2) during the reigns of David and Solomon. The Philistines' relationship with the Israelites is tenuous at best in the Old Testament narrative, but as biblical scholar Hanna Kassis observes, "Gath (a city ruled by the Philistines) . . . is tied to Israel in some kind of treaty relationship, as can be gathered from 1 Kings 2:39–40."<sup>22</sup> As with entering any other covenant in antiquity, the Israelites and their neighbors covenanted to change their view of one another from competing nation-states to fellow kin. While these covenants of kinship all predate the time of Amos by nearly two hundred years, recognition and awareness of these covenants and their impact on sociopolitical relationships in ancient Israel would likely have been known, though no mention of them is made in the Hebrew Bible; such covenants, however, were often memorialized by the erecting of monuments.<sup>23</sup>

*Covenantal kinship through the acceptance of divine law*

Covenantal kinship can also be produced through the acceptance of a shared divine law. Temporal covenants of kinship in antiquity often outline the consequences that would follow should the treaty be violated, leading to the dissolving of the political alliance or the return to hostile relationships.<sup>24</sup> Covenants of kinship associated with divine law, however, carried with them an even greater societal responsibility to care for all those who had entered the covenant, as well as increased consequences for disregarding the obligation of kinship. In Leviticus 17–26, the Lord outlines numerous laws that can be viewed as part of the divine covenants of kinship. Among the obligations outlined as part of this divine law were laws that directly address the way in which kin were to be treated with the explicit use of the term brother (*akh*). Included among these obligations are prohibitions against “[hating] your brother in thine heart” (Leviticus 19:17), “[bearing] a grudge against the children of thy people” (19:18), “cheating one another” (25:14 NRSV), and “[taking] interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from [your brother]” (25:36 NRSV). In addition to these prohibitions, the laws include mandates for how one is to care for one’s kin (including those from neighboring nations) when they have come upon hard times. This can be succinctly summarized as “love thy neighbor as thyself” (19:18). If “thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee” (25:35), those of the covenant “shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens” (25:35 NRSV). Included in this command is an allusion to laws to care for “resident aliens” or foreign refugees that appear in earlier texts of the Old Testament (Exodus 22:21; 23:9; and Leviticus 19:33–34). If “thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee” the law prohibited that individual from being enslaved (Leviticus 25:39) and from being treated harshly (25:46). If those who fell upon these destitute circumstances were purchased by a foreigner (non-Israelite), there was a built-in guarantee of redemption if one of their kin had sufficient means to do so (Leviticus 25:47–49). Such

redemption laws were perpetual and applied to the offspring of the destitute as well.

As just outlined, those who accepted the covenant given by God to Moses were obligated, among other things, to care for their kin. After outlining the blessings that should come upon the Israelites for adhering to their covenant obligations (Leviticus 26:3–13), God himself provides an assurance declaring, “I will maintain my covenant with you” (26:9 NRSV). These promises extended to all Israelites, but especially to those who found themselves marginalized and disadvantaged. They could stand before God as recipients of a divine commitment, a commitment that this covenant would be honored, creating a societal safety net should any of the people of the covenant come upon hard times. But what happens when the elite of society choose to disregard the covenants of kinship and forget those who are disadvantaged and marginalized? Such a scenario is exactly the focus of the prophet Amos.

## Breaking the Covenants of Kinship in the Days of Amos

As referenced in the introduction, Amos pronounces judgments upon the neighboring nations of the ancient Israelites as a subtle and persuasive preface to the indictment God has called him to pronounce upon the Israelite elites. The repetitive use of the noun *transgressions* to explain the actions of Israel’s neighbors (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 6) serves as a preamble to his more direct message. The Hebrew term translated here as “transgression” is *ps’* (פֶּשַׁע), which is defined as “an offence concerning persons and property.”<sup>25</sup> Amos employs this same noun when he speaks for the Lord in declaring “that in the day . . . I shall visit the *transgressions* of Israel upon him” (Amos 3:14; emphasis added). This declaration is linked to a similarly pointed accusation of Israel by Amos earlier in chapter 3: “The Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole *family* that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I *known* of all the *families* of

the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities” (3:1–2 NRSV; emphasis added). While Amos surprisingly uses *‘aon* (און) to describe the misdeeds of the Israelites, Francis Andersen and David Noel Freedman observe that the noun used in verse 2 is to be read with *ps’* used in Amos 3:14 as a “firm link to unify the whole chapter.”<sup>26</sup> Amos employs covenantal and familial language in this indictment to emphasize the divine covenant that has been breached.

*Breaking familial and temporal covenants of kinship—  
the oracles against the nations (Amos 1–2)*

Amos’s indictment against the nations neighboring Israel was prompted by both ethical and covenantal transgressions that predate the prophet,<sup>27</sup> but those actions nevertheless shaped his current society. While a breach of ethics is a serious enough crime to warrant the prophet’s attention, the fact that these transgressions were against individuals in nation-states that were considered kin through temporal covenants exacerbates the situation. Amos’s indictments against Israel’s neighbors centers around the repeated employment of the verb *ps’* (פס), demonstrating that the misdeeds of the surrounding nations are primarily linked to offenses against persons and property. Amos argues that even when nation-states are at war with one other, an ethical standard should be maintained for the dignity of humankind. When the misdeeds of these nations are outlined, they can be separated into two types: martial brutality or human slavery, both aimed at increasing the wealth or luxury of the elite.

Amos declares punishments upon three nations for acts of inhumane martial brutality. The prophet begins by indicting Damascus, the capital of Aram (Syria), because “they have threshed Gilead with threshing instruments of iron” (Amos 1:3 ASV). The threshing mentioned here is not a reference to an annihilation of territorial land but instead is a symbolic reference to martial brutality. The symbolic use of threshing in reference to martial brutality is used elsewhere in the writings of Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 41:15–16 and Micah 4:13). This likely is a reference to the breaching of the covenant of kinship

by the expansion of Aram's territory into the region by Hazael in 814 BC (2 Kings 10:32–33). Similarly, Amos indicts Ammon for having “ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory” (Amos 1:13 NRSV). The image of a woman who is with child being harmed reminds the reader of the injunction given at Sinai that “if men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished” (Exodus 21:22). Amos's final reference to martial brutality relates the atrocities of Moab. In their attempt to expand their territory further to the south in Edom, the Moabites “burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime” (Amos 2:1). Such desecration of human remains is not only an act of violence but a disregard for the individual's life, an act that is not even permitted for criminals in Israelite law (Deuteronomy 21:22–23). In an ancient context, each of these acts of martial brutality was enacted upon victims viewed by the aggressive party as “non-human” and “prey”<sup>28</sup> since they were foreigners or in a lower social position than the aggressors. These views were in stark opposition to the covenants of kinship shared between Israel and each of these nations previously. Such acts of martial brutality, unfortunately, were also prevalent among the Israelite elites throughout the history of ancient Israel (2 Kings 23:16).

Further declarations against inhumane actions are at the center of Amos's indictments against nations participating in the trading of enslaved peoples, namely Gaza, one of the port cities of Philistia, and the city of Tyre. Both cities are accused of carrying “away captive the whole captivity, to deliver them to Edom” (Amos 1:6; see 1:9). These references underscore the involvement of the Philistines and the Phoenicians in the trade of enslaved peoples to Edom, including those who were Israelites,<sup>29</sup> and therefore had claim on the heavenly covenants that ensured their protection from enslavement by their kin and foreigners (Leviticus 25:39, 49). The impact of breaking of this covenant of kinship “was the result of the dissolution of a covenant treaty. Love, peace, (and) brotherhood . . . the unilateral violation of such relationships constituted a grievous error, worthy of the

approaching divine retribution.”<sup>30</sup> As mentioned earlier, Tyre’s transgression is directly tied to not remembering “the covenant of kinship” (1:9 NRSV) but when contextualized with their central role in the triangular trade of enslaved peoples, it becomes even more evident that the Edomites had a disregard for kinship of any who were not within a privileged position.

The punishments pronounced by Amos for disregarding covenants of kinship in Israel’s neighboring nations are aimed at the elite class and the symbols of their power and wealth. In almost every pronounced consequence, Amos references the sending of fire to devour the nation-states’ “palaces” (Amos 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14; and 2:1). The word translated as “palaces” shares the Hebrew root *r-w-m* (רומ), which means “high/lifted up” or, as one dictionary defines it, a “dwelling tower with several stories,”<sup>31</sup> suggesting that an appropriate English translation could be “high-rise.” The focus of Amos’s prophecy is that these high-rises, the residences of the social and economic elite in the major cities of these nation-states, would be devoured by fire. In addition to prophesying about the loss of property exclusively associated with the elite, Amos also prophesies that the Lord will disrupt the current political structures that continue to allow such individuals to maintain power. For Aram, Amos decrees that the Lord will “send a fire into the house of Hazeael, which shall devour the palaces of Ben-hadad” (Amos 1:4). The destruction outlined here is not directed merely to physical structures but also against two of the dominating dynasties in Syrian politics. Similarly, Amos continues by prophesying against the Ammonites that “their king shall go into captivity, he and his princes together” (1:15). In Moab, the Lord will “cut off the judge from the midst thereof, and will slay all the princes thereof with him” (2:3). Taken together, Amos’s pronouncements of punishment are directly pointed at the elite, those who have acquired success by exploiting the disadvantaged, actions that were especially egregious since they were against those who were once kin through temporal covenants. This focus on the elite is not reserved for the

foreign nations condemned by the prophet, but is also the focus of Amos's pronouncements against Israel.

*Breaking the divine covenants of kinship—indictment and prophecies against Israel's elite (Amos 3–9)*

While Amos's indictments against the nations surrounding Israel are direct and carry dire consequences, they merely serve as a preface to the reprimand given to the divine covenantal inhabitants of Israel who commit similar atrocities against their own kin. Unlike many other Old Testament prophets whose messages are aimed at the collective of society, Amos's message carefully singles out the social elites in Israel. Like the implied audience in the Oracle against the Nations, Amos concentrates his message on the privileged of Israelite society. Amos declares, "they know not to do right, saith the Lord, who store up *violence* and *robbery* in their *palaces*" (Amos 3:10; emphasis added). The Hebrew word for *palace* here is the same one Amos used when prophesying destruction upon the elite of other nations. This connection is further emphasized in the pronounced judgment upon Israel connected with Amos 3:14. After Amos declares that the Lord will visit the Israelites on account of their transgressions, the punishment that is pronounced is that the Lord will destroy the "winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end" (3:15). As Shalom Paul observes, "The luxurious way of life of pomp, pleasure, and prosperity of the elite, along with their crimes of exploitation, oppression, and perversion of justice, are cardinal causes for the prophet's categorical threats of the impending catastrophe of destruction and deportation."<sup>32</sup>

A careful reading of the consequences outlined by Amos shows that, in addition to the common themes of destruction, death, and exile, the elite in Israel were to receive a punishment like that of the elite in the neighboring nations, punishments that would leave their possessions in shambles and lead to changes in the political power structure of the society. Throughout Amos's indictment and visions, he references consequences that would have meant little to the

marginalized but would have been threatening to the elite. He begins by referencing that only the “corner of a couch” and “part of a bed” (Amos 3:12 NRSV) would remain after the judgments of God came upon them. Unlike today, couches and beds were luxury items in the world of the Old Testament and were accessible only to the affluent. When understood in the context of Amos’s profession as a pastoralist (7:14), this punishment is presented as a comparison to the absolving of a shepherd of blame should even a piece of a livestock remain following an attack by a beast of prey. The prophet presents the remains of the corner of a couch and a part of a bed as symbolically absolving the lower classes of society from responsibility for the destruction of the elite. Other items that were to be destroyed that would enrage the elite include their own high-rises (6:8), winter and summer homes (3:15), ivory homes (3:15), great houses (3:15), beds of ivory (6:4), and excessive livestock and produce (6:4, 6). The wealth and prestige the elite Israelites acquired through exploitation would be the focus of the Lord’s destruction.

Scholars observe that Amos begins his indictment of the children of Israel with the direct reference to their covenantal relationship with God quoted earlier (Amos 3:2) and uses it to strengthen scholarly argument for the polemic between orthodoxy (correct worship/belief) and orthopraxy (correct action).<sup>33</sup> In doing this, scholars suggest that Amos’s primary message is that such a covenant did not absolve them from an ethical standard. This view, however, minimizes the correlation between covenants and kinship. Instead, reading Amos’s indictment against the children of Israel while recognizing the inseparable connection between kinship and covenant emphasized that Israel’s covenants with God, both from a familial and a divine perspective, required an even higher awareness and practice of the ethical standard, one that exceeded that of the temporal covenants of kinship entered into by other nations.

While the divine obligations of kinship accepted at Mount Sinai (Leviticus 25:35) are alluded to in the writings of Amos (Amos 2:4), the prophet explicitly reaffirms the kinship of his Israelite audience

by making frequent references to the familial kinship of the house of Israel (5:1, 4, 25; 6:1, 14; 7:10; and 9:9), reference to the patriarch Judah (2:4–5), and three references to the patriarch Joseph (5:6, 15; and 6:6). The three references to Joseph are particularly instructive because they establish a familial kinship among the prophet's audience. First, Amos warns that if the Israelites will not "seek the Lord," he "will break out like fire in the house of Joseph" (5:6). This reference to the house of Joseph is intended to draw upon the familial language and underscore the kinship of Amos's audience. Additionally, this reference echoes the destruction that was pronounced by Amos upon the Aramean house of Hazael (1:4), suggesting that the prophet was pronouncing that the house of Joseph (a possible allusion to Bethel, the national center of the northern kingdom and the seat of governance)<sup>34</sup> would also be disposed of and lose their elite status. Amos's second reference to Joseph appears to again highlight the kinship nature of the Israelites as the "remnant of Joseph" (5:15) or the remaining posterity of a shared ancestor. The last statement appears as a direct statement to the social elites in connection with their lavish lifestyle. After listing their many luxurious items, Amos acknowledges that they "are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (6:6). While scholarly consensus supports this as a reference to the impending destruction of the northern kingdom, read within the context of Amos's condemnation of the elite, this reference may be a rebuke upon the elite for not noticing the economic inequality and dire situation of the destitute and poor among them who were also of the lineage of Joseph. Similar statements of kinship appear in the writings of Amos's contemporary, Hosea (Hosea 1:10–2:1) and the psalms (Psalm 22:22–23).

Amos airs a plethora of grievances against the elite of the Israelites that go against the covenants of kinship. Such grievances include oppressing the poor (Amos 4:1), crushing the needy (4:1), trampling the poor (5:11), pushing aside the needy in the gate (5:12), and trampling the needy (8:4). Each of these transgressions constitutes an omission of deeds that would be explicitly expected in the kinship

covenant discussed above. In addition to disregarding kinship, Amos also condemns actions that took advantage of the destitute, including unethically raising the price on food and purchasing individuals as enslaved persons. Amos condemns deceptions in the selling of wheat—the elite made “the ephah small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances” (8:5) and for taking from the poor levies (taxes) of grain (5:11). In each of these cases, the elite took advantage of the poor to increase their own profits, actions forbidden by the law (Leviticus 19:35–36; 25:14). When the disadvantaged could no longer operate under these circumstances, the elite in Israel would “buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes” (Amos 8:6), actions that stand in opposition to the covenant of kinship outlined in Leviticus 25:39–43 and lead to the enslavement of fellow Israelites. As Old Testament scholar Gregory Chirichigno points out, “excessive taxation is one of the possible causes for debt-slavery and the alienation of land, it is also most likely that the control of resources and lending by the ruling elite, which included both state officials and private landowners, caused many small farmers to sell their dependents and themselves into debt-slavery, and eventually to sell their land.”<sup>35</sup> In all these ways, the elite and privileged of the Israelite society were failing to take care of their kin. Even worse, they were exploiting them for their personal gain. When viewed against the divine covenants of kinship, it becomes clear that the Israelites had violated their obligation to care for the disadvantaged and marginalized.

Understanding these transgressions against the poor and needy in the context of the covenants of kinship illuminates not only the historical context of the crimes, but also provides a clearer picture of why the consequences outlined by Amos are directed so pointedly at the elite. Amos’s message is equally applicable to individuals throughout time who seek to uphold the covenants of kinship. Today, if one is not careful, they may find themselves feeling the same “ease” (Amos 6:1) experienced by the Israelite elite that disconnected them from the afflictions of their own kin (6:6).

## Modern Covenants of Kinship

Understanding the centrality of caring for the disadvantaged within ancient covenants of kinship is instructive for readers of Amos in any dispensation. This function of covenants in the creation of kinship is equally apparent in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Today members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints make divine covenants of kinship that include an explicit directive to “bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light” (Mosiah 18:8). Additionally, members of the faith community are encouraged to utilize familial language to refer to one another as “sister” or “brother.” This view of kinship is further emphasized since each Church member is to “esteem his brother [or sister] as himself” (Doctrine and Covenants 38:24–25). But who is the “brother” spoken of in this revelation? According to President Marion G. Romney, the covenant of baptism extends beyond membership in the church and “the scriptures clearly establish the fact that caring for the poor is a covenantal obligation” (Mosiah 4:26)<sup>36</sup> regardless of social, religious, or economic status. Commenting on this covenant to care for others, President Henry B. Eyring has said, “Every member has made a covenant to do works of kindness as the Savior would do. So, any call to bear witness and to care for others is not a request for extra service. . . . Each is a chance to prove what blessings flow from being a covenant people, and each is an opportunity for which you agreed to be accountable.”<sup>37</sup> Like the Israelites of old, Latter-day Saints have made covenants of kinship that are rooted in “lov[ing] thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18). In addition to the covenant made at baptism, endowed members of the Church covenant within the walls of holy temples to receive and honor the law of consecration.<sup>38</sup> This covenant ensures that all who enter it will “voluntarily dedicate their time, talents, and material wealth to the establishment and building up of God’s Kingdom”<sup>39</sup> so that all can have “all things common among them; therefore there [are] not rich and poor” (4 Nephi 1:3).<sup>40</sup> Like the Israelites of old, Latter-day Saints have made these heavenly covenants of kinship

with God and are not immune from the consequences should they neglect the poor and the needy.

According to a 2009 Pew Research survey, a majority of Latter-day Saints (54%) are in the middle- or high-income bracket in the United States,<sup>41</sup> which situates them well within the wealthiest people in the world.<sup>42</sup> In almost every respect, Latter-day Saints in the United States can be considered among the elite and privileged. Such a fact serves as a warning for us to be aware of our own desires and purposes. Members of the Church who have made covenants of kinship should regularly reflect on where their desires are and course correct if they find that their hearts are set upon the things of this world (Doctrine and Covenants 121:35) more than upon the well-being of their kin. When the prophet Moroni saw our day, he similarly laments, “Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not?” (Mormon 8:39). President N. Eldon Tanner gets to the heart of the issue for both the ancient Israelites and modern readers. He declared, “The most difficult thing for us seems to be to give of ourselves, to do away with selfishness. If we really love someone, nothing is a hardship. Nothing is hard for us to do for that individual. There is no real happiness in having or getting, but only in giving. Half the world seems to be following the wrong scent in the pursuit of happiness. They think it consists of having and getting, and in having others serve them, but really it consists of giving and serving others.”<sup>43</sup> The stark warning from the text of Amos and the history that follows reveal that those who disregard their covenants of kinship and focus on having, getting, and being served will eventually lose it all.

## Conclusion

This detailed study of the connection between covenants and kinship helps illuminate the prophetic writings of Amos and make them applicable in our own day. By understanding the way in which covenants

and kinship were inseparable in the world of the Old Testament, we better understand the obligations that were associated with covenant making among peoples of the ancient Near East and the consequences that were the result of obedience or disobedience to them. This understanding is instructive on multiple levels. Recognizing covenant kinship is helpful in contextualizing the prophecies of Amos, especially in reconciling the themes of orthodoxy and orthopraxy within the book. Amos's reprimand of those of elite status among the Israelites and the surrounding nations is understood as the articulation of direct consequences for breaking familial, temporal, and divine covenants of kinship. These consequences, while including general elements of death, destruction, and exile, were unique because they include direct reference to material possessions that were more highly valued by the elite than their fellow kin. As Latter-day Saints, such an understanding increases awareness of the kinship that is inherent in the covenants we have made and reminds us to take those covenants seriously by caring for the disadvantaged and marginalized among us and other nations, especially in times of our own ease and security.

## Notes

1. John Priest, "The Covenant of Brothers," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 400–406. The King James Version of the Bible is the primary English translation of the Bible that will be cited throughout this chapter. If the KJV is used, a citation to a biblical verse is cited without specification of the translation. Other translations will sometimes be referenced, especially when kinship language is more faithfully preserved and will be cited appropriately.
2. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 261.
3. Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 11–13.

4. Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, 4.
5. According to Cross, “The language of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘fatherhood,’ ‘love,’ and ‘loyalty,’ is ‘covenant terminology.’ This is to turn things upside down. The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from the language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh.” See *From Epic to Canon*, 11. Examples of Amos’s use of kinship terminology are found throughout Amos. The term *love* (אהב, *’ahav*) is used in Amos 4:5 and 5:15; *brother* (אח, *’akh*) in 1:9 and 1:11; *son/child* (בן, *ben*) in 2:11; 3:1, 12; 4:5; 7:17; and 9:7; *daughter* (בת, *bat*) in 7:17; *wife* (אשה, *’ishah*) in 4:3 and 7:17; and *father* (אב, *’av*) in 2:4 and 2:7.
6. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 226–27.
7. See John Barton, *The Theology of the Book of Amos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ferry Yefta Mamahit, “Establishing Justice in the Land: Rhetoric and Theology of Social Justice in the Book of Amos” (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2010); and Walter Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), esp. 58–71.
8. Scholars identify tension in the text of Amos between social justice and religious law as an important theme of the book; see Nili Wazana, “Amos against Amaziah (Amos 7:10–17): A Case of Mutual Exclusion,” *Vetus Testamentum* 70 (2020): 209–28; and John W. Hilber, “Liturgy and Cult,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Mark J. Broda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 513–24.
9. According to George E. Mendenhall, the enactment of a covenant “almost always (included) some kind of ritual act that is regarded as essential to the ratification of the binding promise.” See Mendenhall, “Covenants,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 1179.
10. Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 249.

11. Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. Mervyn E. J. Richardson, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999), s.v. כָּא; hereafter HALOT.
12. Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (London: Routledge, 1969; repr., 2004), 237.
13. HALOT, בְּרִית.
14. Cross identifies these terms as follows: Arabic *‘ahd*, Aramaic *‘ādāyyā’*, Akkadian *riksātum*, and Hebrew *‘ēdōt* (עֲדוֹת); see Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, 16–17.
15. Johannes Pedersen, *Der Eid bei den Semiten in seinem Verhältnis zu verwandten Erscheinungen sowie die Stellung des Eides im Islam* (Strasbourg: Karl J. Trübner, 1914), 8; trans. Frank Moore Cross in *From Epic to Canon*, 16.
16. J. Andrew Dearman, “The Family in the Old Testament,” *Interpretation* 52 (1998): 117–29.
17. Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 108.
18. James L. Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 35.
19. It should be noted that the posterity of Jacob and Esau are not the only descendants in the Old Testament who receive the benefits of a covenant of kinship; see the covenant made between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18:1–3 and reaffirmed in 2 Samuel 1:26. Cross comments that “the covenant is binding on the offspring of David and Jonathan. David is to protect Jonathan’s name (lineage) in the event of his death. In life and death, loyalty appropriate to kinsmen is to be kept unbroken.” See Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, 9.
20. Scott W. Hahn, *Kingship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 28–31.
21. While Edom is primarily discussed in the Old Testament in kinship with Israel based on their shared ancestry, 2 Samuel 8:13 and 1 Kings 11:15 describe events in which David and Solomon subjugate Edom through

- a treaty that forges a covenant of kinship primarily based on political alliances.
22. Hanna E. Kassiss, "Gath and the Structure of 'Philistine' Society," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 259–71.
  23. See Samuel Greengus, "Covenant and Treaty in the Hebrew Bible and in the Ancient Near East," in *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 126. An example of such monumental inscriptions memorializing a treaty between nation-states that is contemporaneous to the time of Amos is the inscriptions of Bar-Ga'yah and Mati'el from Sefire; see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Inscriptions of Bar-Ga'yah and Mati'el from Sefire," in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions, and Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 2 of *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, ed. William Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 213–17.
  24. Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004).
  25. HALOT, פשע.
  26. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 383.
  27. Jason Radine, *The Book of Amos in Emergent Judah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 72.
  28. Ilona Zsolnay, review of *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Contexts*, by T. M. Lemos, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 140 (2020): 251–53.
  29. Tchavdar S. Hadjiev, *The Composition and Redaction of the Book of Amos* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 45–46.
  30. Keith N. Schoville, "A Note on the Oracles of Amos against Gaza, Tyre, and Edom," in *Studies on Prophecy: A Collection of Twelve Papers*, ed. G. W. Anderson et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 58.
  31. HALOT, ארמון.
  32. Shalom M. Paul, "Amos 3:15—Winter and Summer Mansions," *Vetus Testamentum* 28 (1978): 358–60.
  33. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 383.

34. Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 46.
35. Gregory Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 127.
36. Marion G. Romney, "Caring for the Poor—A Covenantal Obligation," *Ensign*, November 1978, 89.
37. Henry B. Eyring, "Witnesses for God," *Ensign*, November 1996, 31.
38. David A. Bednar, "Prepared to Obtain Every Needful Thing," *Ensign*, May 2019, 103.
39. Guide to the Scriptures, "Consecrate, Law of Consecration," <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/consecrate-law-of-consecration>.
40. The context of 4 Nephi 1:3 is instructive in this manner. Mormon, in his recitation of the history of the Nephites, emphasizes that there were no poor among both the Nephites and the Lamanites, suggesting that the benefits of consecration extended beyond covenantal boundaries.
41. Pew Research Center, "A Portrait of Mormons in the U.S.," <https://pewforum.org/2009/07/24/a-portrait-of-mormons-in-the-us>.
42. Pew Research Center, "How Americans Compare with the Global Middle Class," <https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/09/how-americans-compare-with-the-global-middle-class>.
43. N. Eldon Tanner, "The Great Commandment," in Conference Report, April 1967, 104.