

By the Waters of Anduin We Lay Down and Wept: Tolkien's *Akallabêth* and the Prophetic Imagination

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An exemplary nation is elected by God to fulfill a unique calling. Summoned to a promised land of material and spiritual

abundance and tutored in the ways of wisdom, God's chosen people grow in power and splendor. Soon, however, cracks begin to form. The leaders fall away from their high ideals; the radical vision upon which the community was founded erodes, to be replaced with oppression of the poor and elite entanglement in webs of imperial power. At the apex of its hubris, the nation is laid low by a cataclysm so total that it shatters the people's understanding of themselves, their world, and their God. Untold thousands of innocents perish; God's own hallowed place is wiped from the face of the earth; a mere handful of survivors escape into exile. Looking back

with longing from a distant land, the faithful attempt to come to terms with the enormity of the catastrophe. The question

looms like a storm-cloud filling the horizon: how could God allow this to happen? Adherents of the Abrahamic faiths will recognize this as the story of Israel in the period leading up to and immediately following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. Readers of J.R.R. Tolkien's literary mythology may notice that it is also the story of the *Akallabêth*: the Downfall of Númenor, the island kingdom whose destruction forms the final, cosmos-rending tragedy of the Second Age of Middle-earth.

The literary sources of Númenor range widely, from Greek myths and British folklore to twentieth century speculative fiction (Larsen, p. 8–9). To note the parallels between

Tolkien's myth of Númenor and Plato's myth of Atlantis is to run the risk of restating the obvious. Tolkien repeatedly



and explicitly links Númenor with his 'Atlantis-haunting', his Dream of the Great Wave:

This legend or myth or dim memory of some ancient history has always troubled me. In sleep I had the dreadful dream of the ineluctable Wave, either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands. It still occurs occasionally, though now exorcized by writing about it. It always ends by surrender, and I awake gasping out of deep water. I used to draw it or write bad poems about it. (*Letters, Letter 257, p. 347*)

I am not entirely convinced by John Rosegrant's conclusion that this 'Atlantis complex' (*Letters, Letter 163, p. 212*) was a working-out of the early loss of Tolkien's father; but his point about recurring, lost father-figures in the Númenor legends is well taken (Rosegrant, p. 148). Verlyn Flieger has further shown that Tolkien draws in Celtic legends of drowned western lands such as Lyonesse off the coast of Cornwall and Hy-Brasil off the coast of Ireland, creating an 'asterisk-myth' for widespread European legends of a submerged continent in the forgotten west (2017, p. 217). Elsewhere we find authorial comparisons to ancient Mediterranean civilizations including Rome (*Letters, Letter 294, p. 376*), Byzantium (*Letters, Letter 131, p. 157*), and especially Egypt (*Letters, Letter 211, p. 281*). Dimitra Fimi shows how the earliest versions of the Númenor legend were highly influenced by Anglo-Saxon and Viking mariners, arguing that Tolkien's subsequent turn to the Mediterranean was in part influenced by the increasingly unsavory taste of all things 'Nordic' in the wake of World War II (p. 175; cf. *Letters, Letter 294, pp. 375–6*). Pamina Fernández Camacho meanwhile has explored the island kingdom's wider Near Eastern connections, including the debt which the Númenórean language Adúnaic owes to Semitic tongues (2016, pp. 203–4) and Númenor's maritime empire which can be likened to the ancient Phoenicians and Carthaginians (2023, 85).

Númenor's thematic roots reach down to the Bible as well. Tolkien himself links Númenor with the Biblical Flood, calling Elendil 'a Noachian figure' (*Letters, Letter 156, p. 131*). Fernández Camacho (2016) further draws extensive parallels between the *Akallabêth* and the biblical Exodus as do Caryn Cooper and Kevin Whetter. The latter scholars note the similarity between Ar-Pharazôn the last King of Númenor and the oppressive Pharaoh of Exodus, from the hardening of their hearts in the face of plagues right down to the phonetics of the respective words (pp. 3–4). Cooper and Whetter go further, stating that the *Akallabêth* functions as the 'founding narrative of the Dúnedain of Middle-earth' (p. 2) in much the same way that the Exodus does for Israel:

'Both myths bear the theme of God's ultimate power, his safekeeping of his chosen people, and his justice against their enemies. [...] In this way, the Dúnedain are implied to

be equivalently special to Ilúvatar as Israel is to [YHWH]¹, and fundamentally a society protected by their faith in and ultimately answerable only to him, bound by their 'one loyalty' to him in return[.] (pp. 4–5)

However, whereas the Exodus narrates God's liberating activity in the history of the Hebrew people, the Downfall of Númenor tells a story of divine catastrophe. Megan Fontenot's reading of Númenor through the lens of biblical apocalypse strikes nearer to the mark (pp. 92–3). The Downfall is shot through with apocalyptic overtones: portentous signs and omens; terrifying plagues; empires laid low in a sudden, irrevocable act of divine intervention. Still, for all their vivid portrayal of cosmic devastation, Jewish and Christian apocalypses are fundamentally *eucaustrophic*. This is Tolkien's term for the 'sudden turn' which is the hallmark of not only fairy-stories but the Christian Gospel itself:

It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (*OFS, p. 75*)

In biblical apocalypse, the *dyscatastrophe* is a harsh but necessary prelude to the hopeful unveiling of the Reign of God. The Fall of Númenor, meanwhile, is an all-but-unmitigated disaster whose outcome is not a new reign of peace and freedom on earth but the removal of the Undying Lands from the circles of the world forevermore. In terms of narrative and thematic resonance if not necessarily conscious influence - a slippery thing to pin down in the best of circumstances - an exilic prophet such as Jeremiah is a better fit for the *Akallabêth* than Exodus, the Book of Revelation, or even Noah's Flood.

In what follows, I wish to tease out the parallels between these two great myths of fidelity, apostasy, and catastrophe. I will read the Book of Jeremiah in conversation with Tolkien's *Akallabêth* and the figure to whom its authorship is attributed within Tolkien's secondary world: Elendil the Faithful, leader of the Númenóreans in exile. Jeremiah and the *Akallabêth* both address the problem of theodicy, the question of how an all-powerful, all-loving God can permit suffering and evil. Their twinned approaches to this conundrum shed light on the theological dynamics at I I render the name of the God of Israel here and elsewhere as YHWH, which according to Jewish tradition cannot be pronounced and which is traced back etymologically to the Hebrew root H-Y-H 'to be, to become'. Compare this to God's self-revelation to Moses in the Burning Bush: *eyeh asher eyeh*, 'I Am Who I Am' (Exodus 3:14). The Name of God is not spoken on the grounds that it cannot be spoken; *Adonai* 'the Lord' and *Hashem* 'the Name' are two common glosses in liturgical and everyday speech, respectively. Many modern scholars use the vocalized form 'Yahweh' to designate the ancient Israelite deity; I follow the rabbinical tradition.

work, not only in Tolkien's fiction, but also in his (and our) primary world. Drawing upon progressive Christian and Jewish theology and the mythopoetic richness of Tolkien's legendarium where no single perspective is ever absolute, I will complicate the theodicy of 'blessings and curses' we find in both Jeremiah and the *Akallabêth*, one which too easily shades into baptizing violence and blaming victims for their own suffering. Finally, I close by submitting that Tolkien's legendarium as a whole can be read as a work of prophetic imagination, a mythopoetic reckoning with the irrevocable loss of a communal past and the challenge of living into a hopeful future in a broken world.

For readers unfamiliar with the biblical Book of Jeremiah, or even for those who are, some historical context is in order. Jeremiah's prophetic career begins during the reign of King Josiah of Judah in 626 BCE, spanning the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the subsequent exile of a significant portion of the Judean population. According to the royal theology of Judah's ruling elites, 'because [YHWH] had chosen the Davidic dynasty, neither it nor its capital, Jerusalem, could ever be destroyed. The visible sign of this guarantee was the Temple, [YHWH]'s own home' (Coogan and Chapman, p. 307). By way of contrast, Jeremiah proclaims that the people must constantly renew their covenant commitments to love God (Deut. 6:4-5) and love their neighbors as themselves (Lev. 19:18) if they wish to remain in the Promised Land. The Judeans have fallen away from their holy vocation to do justice and seek peace, but Jeremiah promises on God's behalf:

[I]f you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors forever and ever. (Jer. 7:5-7)²

By the early decades of the sixth century BCE, however, Judah has entered into strategic alliances with regional imperial powers in a doomed campaign to stave off the might of Babylon, funneling resources into military armament and the enrichment of elites rather than care for the vulnerable (Coogan and Chapman, pp. 295-7). Babylon's response to such machinations is predictable: invade Judah, raze Jerusalem to the ground, and send its inhabitants into exile. Jeremiah's own career concludes in Egypt, where he prophesies the eventual restoration of the fortunes of Judah and a return to the Holy Land:

With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back;
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path where they shall not stumble,
for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

2 All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE).

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him
and will keep him as a shepherd does a flock.'
For the Lord has ransomed Jacob
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. (Jer. 31:9-11)

The Book of Jeremiah, as a text, is presented as a collection of the sayings of the prophet, compiled by his scribe Baruch (Jer. 36:4). The actual history of its composition is more complicated. It appears to have been assembled in pieces over the course of the mid-sixth century BCE, reaching its final form during or immediately following the Babylonian Exile (Coogan and Chapman, pp.301-2). As the Hebrew Bible scholar Kathleen O'Connor writes, 'What the book of Jeremiah does is to present a portrait of the prophet that mixes fact and interpretation inextricably. [...] Its purpose was to help the people make sense of their tragedy, recover their identity, and move toward the future' (p. 178).

Before I can argue that the *Akallabêth* fulfills a similar purpose for the Númenórean exiles in Middle-earth, I must first sketch out the complicated genesis of the narrative - this is J.R.R. Tolkien after all, a man who left behind a textual tradition hardly less convoluted than the Bible at times. As Fliieger (p. 160) observes, the composition of the Númenor-myth falls out into three major periods:

1. The 'Fall of Númenor,' which was written in conjunction with Tolkien's unfinished time-travel novel *The Lost Road* in and around 1936.
2. The 'Drowning of Anadûnê,' which emerged as part of the (also unfinished) time-travel adventure *The Notion-Club Papers* in 1944 and which Tolkien worked on during a lull in his decade-long quest to finish *The Lord of the Rings*.
3. The *Akallabêth*, which was completed in the late 1950s following the appearance of *The Lord of the Rings* and which Christopher Tolkien published largely (but not entirely) intact in *The Silmarillion* in 1977.

According to Christopher Tolkien, these three versions of the legend represent three different textual 'traditions' within Middle-earth: the Elvish 'Fall', the Mannish 'Drowning', and the mixed Dúnedanic *Akallabêth* (*Sauron*, pp. 406-7). He is here referring to his father's elaborate metatextual conceit that every story of Middle-earth is 'actually' written by a particular character in Middle-earth. Just as in primary-world mythologies, every text of the legendarium embodies a particular, limited viewpoint, informed by the fictional narrator's cultural and historical situation (cf. Fliieger 2005, xiv). As Dawn Walls-Thuma notes, this textual conceit introduces the possibility of what we might call 'secondary' authorial bias: 'glimpses of the loremasters' limitations and

fallibility show that Tolkien considered how his loremasters would be inclined to view particular characters and situations, given their own personal backgrounds' (p. 7). With respect to the secondary authorship of the *Akallabêth*, the 'Line of Elros', also written in the late 1950s and later published in *Unfinished Tales*, attributes it to Elendil and notes that copies of the text were preserved in Gondor (*UT*, p. 227).

There are good textual reasons for accepting Elendil's secondary authorship of the *Akallabêth*. One is the narrative prominence and detail of the conversations between Elendil and his father Amandil in which the latter decides to seek the pardon of the Valar, in open defiance of the ruling regime (*Silmarillion*, pp. 275–6). Given the personally as well as politically charged nature of these conversations, this information could only have come from Elendil himself after his father's doomed voyage to the West. Likewise, the critical moment of the Downfall itself is narrated from Elendil's immediate emotional perspective in his ship off the eastern coast of Númenor: 'But when the devouring wave rolled over the land and Númenor toppled to its fall, then he [i.e., Elendil] would have been overwhelmed and would have deemed it the lesser grief to perish, for no wrench of death could be more bitter than the loss and agony of that day' (*Silmarillion*, pp. 279–280). However, the final paragraphs of the published *Akallabêth*, with their references to the changed shape of the world and latter-day legends of seafaring Men who stumbled upon the Straight Road to Elvenhome, are clearly the additions of a later commentator (pp. 281–2). In a frame narrative which Christopher Tolkien excised from the published text, the *Akallabêth* is in fact presented as direct address from an unnamed speaker in Tol Eressëa, presumably the Elvish historian Pengoloð, to the human mariner Ælfwine of England (*Peoples*, pp. 141–3, 159). Accepting for the moment Tolkien's frame narrative of textual transmission, Pengoloð must have had access to a copy of the *Akallabêth* which was brought over the Sundering Seas by one of the returning Elvish exiles. Perhaps it was Elrond himself who furnished the text - he would have had access to such records in Rivendell as well as a family interest in preserving them (*UT*, p. 165). I proceed upon the assumption that while the final text of the *Akallabêth* must have passed through the editorial hands of both the scribes of Gondor as well as the Eldar of the Lonely Isle, its core originates with Elendil himself.

The foregoing discussion sets us up to discern the theological work that the *Akallabêth* is doing for the exiled Númenóreans within the Tolkienian diegesis. For the Hebrew prophets, God is in control of history: everything that occurs is ultimately of God's will (Coogan, p. 86). The destruction of Jerusalem is thus no senseless tragedy; God is using the Babylonian Empire to punish unfaithful Judah:

For thus says the Lord of hosts:
Cut down her trees;
cast up a siege ramp against Jerusalem.
This is the city that must be punished;

there is nothing but oppression within her.
As a well keeps its water fresh,
so she keeps fresh her wickedness;
violence and destruction are heard within her;
sickness and wounds are ever before me.
Take warning, O Jerusalem,
or I shall turn from you in disgust
and make you a desolation,
an uninhabited land. (Jer. 6:6–7)

The chief wickedness against which Jeremiah rails is idolatry, a word which requires some elucidation in this context. At its most basic it may refer to the worship of non-Israelite deities, as when Jeremiah decries the cult of the 'queen of heaven' (Jer. 7:16–20, 44:15–25). The precise identity of this divine personage is unknown, but the most likely candidate seems to be the Canaanite goddess Astarte (Bauer-Levesque, p. 388)³. However, as the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich has argued, one may make an idol of anything which is not God, including the individual ego, the nation, or the pursuit of wealth and power (pp. 10–12). In this sense, Judah's involvement in imperial alliances and its neglect for the poor are every bit as idolatrous as any cultic practices, if not more so. Whatever we might think of Jeremiah's attitude toward non-biblical faiths - speaking as a religious pluralist, it certainly leaves a bad taste in my mouth - we can see that for the prophets, ritual practice and social relations are interlinked expressions of one's religious commitments. The demolition of the Temple, previously believed to be God's dwelling-place on earth, is the supremely ironic punishment for the idolatry of power; for it is a punishment handed down by the same God whose Temple it was, using the Babylonians as unwitting agents. This prophetic stance heralds a radical transformation in the history of Israelite theology, which moves away from *henotheism*, belief in multiple gods but with primary commitment to a single deity, toward *monotheism*, belief in a single transcendent deity who is responsible for everything that happens (Coogan, p. 42; Fackenheim, p. 26).

However, monotheism produces a conundrum which will be familiar to modern believers and nonbelievers alike: if God is indeed the omnipotent Lord of History, why does

3 I would be remiss if I did not point out that the denunciation of the 'queen of heaven' is part of a persistent and deeply troubling pattern of misogyny in the biblical prophets. In Jeremiah and elsewhere, perhaps most notably Hosea, God's people Israel are frequently likened to an unfaithful wife and a 'harlot'. Descriptions of divine punishment quickly take on overtones of sexual violence: 'The people gendered female here are told that their own apostasy is responsible for their being raped' (Bauer-Levesque, p. 390; see also O'Connor, pp. 179–180 and Masenya, p. 152). Tolkien mostly avoids this explicit gendering of evil. In an excellent recent paper, however, Mercury Natis demonstrates how the role of temptress, usually played in biblical writings by a *femme fatale* such as Salomé or Lilith, is queered in the *Akallabêth* by Sauron.

God fail to prevent suffering and evil? This is the problem of *theodicy*. Jeremiah provides one answer: suffering is deserved punishment for wrongdoing. This theodicy of ‘blessings and curses’ is not the only biblical response to the problem of pain. One need only look to the Book of Job for a counterargument: Job’s friends’ insistence that his misfortune is just deserts for his sins is treated as a foolish, indeed pointless exercise in metaphysical speculation (Mitchell, xiii–xiv). Nevertheless, the theodicy of blessings and curses is a powerful strain in the heritage of the Abrahamic faiths down to the present day. The Christian process theologian Catherine Keller views it as an understandable but nevertheless misguided attempt to explain away the mystery of suffering. In order for God to remain in control of everything that happens, good and bad, divine love must be sacrificed upon the altar of divine power. Omnipotence is maintained, but only at the expense of mercy (Keller, p. 81).

The *Akallabêth* articulates a fundamentally similar theodicy in response to a fundamentally similar catastrophe, which Elendil’s authorship brings into focus. The capsule history of Númenor which comprises the first section of the text provides a theological genealogy of Ilúvatar’s role in Númenórean history. The Dúnedain receive the land of Númenor as a reward for their role in the war against Morgoth in the First Age. The price of this gift is continued fealty to Ilúvatar and to the Valar as his plenipotentiaries. For earlier generations of Númenóreans, this devotion is easier to maintain given their historical proximity to the War of Wrath. For Elendil and the latter-day Númenóreans, however, the existence of Ilúvatar is strictly a matter of belief. Meanwhile mortality, the so-called ‘Gift of Ilúvatar’, is a present reality which only grows more inescapable with every passing year. Upon arrival in Númenor, Sauron exploits the felt distance between the invisibility of God and the visibility of Death to build support for an idolatrous cult of Melkor. He tells Ar-Pharazôn:

[T]he Valar have deceived you concerning him, putting forward the name of Eru, a phantom devised in the folly of their hearts, seeking to enchain Men in servitude to themselves. For they are the oracle of this Eru, which speaks only what they will. But he that is their master shall yet prevail, and he will deliver you from this phantom; and his name is Melkor, Lord of All, Giver of Freedom, and he shall make you stronger than they. (*Silmarillion*, pp. 271–2)

Ar-Pharazôn and his followers are taken in by Sauron’s whisperings⁴. They forsake the worship of Eru upon the

4 In the secondary world of the characters, the fact that the *Akallabêth* reports Sauron’s private words to Ar-Pharazôn, spoken behind closed doors, can be explained as a historical reconstruction by the fictive author of the text, Elendil or one of his redactors. In the primary world of the reader, it is of course simply one of many cases where Tolkien’s desire to tell a compelling story outweighs his desire to maintain a perfectly consistent metafiction (cf. Flieger, pp. 79–80).

Meneltarma, the Pillar of Heaven at the center of Númenor, and build a temple to Melkor in the midst of the capital city of Annúminas. Sauron kindles the sacrificial fire with the wood of the white tree Nimloth, the living symbol of Númenor’s connection to the Valar: ‘Thereafter the fire and smoke went up without ceasing; for the power of Sauron daily increased, and in that temple, with spilling of blood and torment and great wickedness, men made sacrifice to Melkor that he should release them from Death’ (*Silmarillion*, p. 273). Gerard Hynes observes that the biblical prophets often use trees as a symbol of covenant; thus ‘[t]he sacrilegious burning of the White Tree marks the moment at which Númenórean moral decline reaches its event horizon, to be followed soon after by the disastrous imperial venture that is the invasion of Valinor’ (p. 125). For as in Jeremiah, works and worship are linked: just as they incinerate Nimloth and abandon the hallow of the Meneltarma for the Temple of Melkor, the Númenóreans abandon their vocation to be a blessing unto the rest of Arda (cf. Gen. 12:1–3). This is not a shift that takes place in a single instant; for centuries Númenor’s relationship with the Men of Middle-earth has been slipping from trade and benevolent instruction to extractive colonialism. Under Ar-Pharazôn, the process comes to terrible fruition:

[T]hey came no longer as bringers of gifts, nor even as rulers, but as fierce men of war. And they hunted the men of Middle-earth and took their goods and enslaved them, and many they slew cruelly upon their altars. [...] Thus Ar-Pharazôn, King of the Land of the Star, grew to the mightiest tyrant that had yet been in the world since the reign of Morgoth, though in truth Sauron ruled all from behind the throne. (*Silmarillion*, p. 274)

In the midst of everything, Elendil and his followers remain skeptical of Sauron and his enticements. With prophetic insight, they foresee that the time is coming when Númenor’s bloody pursuit of deathlessness will turn to its undoing. For their unwillingness to participate in Númenor’s imperial death-cult, the Faithful become the ruling regime’s favorite candidates for human sacrifice (*Silmarillion*, pp. 273–5). Yet it is only the Faithful who escape the island’s destruction.

However - and this is crucial - readers can take Tolkien’s own pronouncements about the metaphysics of his invented world at face value and identify Sauron as the deceiver that he is; the Númenórean Faithful are in no such privileged position. Ilúvatar’s existence and the true nature of mortality must be taken on, well, faith - or perhaps better *estel*, the Sindarin word for hope without guarantees. Thus, when the disaster comes to pass, Elendil and his followers do not and cannot have direct knowledge of the mind of Ilúvatar. The information we find in the published *Akallabêth*, recounting the words and deeds of Ar-Pharazôn in Valinor and explaining the Valar’s motivations in yielding up the government of Arda (*Silmarillion*, pp. 278–9), must derive from either Elvish sources in Tol Eressëa or, if they do originate with Elendil, surmise. Upon arrival in Middle-earth, Elendil and the Númenórean exiles simply cannot have absolute certainty about why the Downfall happened.

Instead, they are left with the inescapable, shattering fact that it did happen. I read the *Akallabêth* as Elendil coming to terms with the enormity of that fact, the loss of the land he loved and the deaths of untold numbers of his people - including, we must not forget, the children and non-human inhabitants of Númenor, all of whom have now paid the price for the sins of others. A theodicy of divine punishment for apostasy is perfectly comprehensible given the circumstances, but it generates the same problems as the blessings and curses of Jeremiah. Is a God who actively wills the slaughter of the innocents a God worth believing in?

This is not an idle question about the motivations of a fictional narrator. The exercise of parsing Elendil's *Akallabêth* as a text produced by a historically situated individual with his own theological leanings and longings can help us to read Tolkien's *Akallabêth* as the same thing, a mythopoetic response to the selfsame questions of meaning in the modern age. One need look no further than the First World War in which Tolkien himself served. 'Something has gone crack', he wrote upon the death of his friend Rob Gilson at the Somme in 1916 (Garth, p. 169). In one sentence he captures the feeling that pervaded his generation and, in some ways, all the generations who were to follow them. The philosopher Charles Taylor points to WWI as the critical inflection point in the decline of religious belief in the modern West. The industrial 'progress' of the Western colonial powers in modernity did not produce a secular utopia, still less the Heavenly City on earth. Its chief outcome was rather the disenchantment of the world, the immiseration of the masses, and a military conflagration of unprecedented proportions whose perfunctory conclusion set the stage for two decades of economic collapse and another, even bloodier war. Taylor asks: 'How to respond to *this* sense, the idea that we are living after the demise of a viable order? [...] [T]he sense of living in a shattered order has remained at some level as a truth of experience' (pp. 408–9). Amandil's parting words to his family might have been a prophecy of the spiritual exile that awaited Tolkien's generation:

But it is most likely that you shall fly from the Land of the Star with no star to guide you; for that land is defiled. Then you shall lose all that you have loved, foretasting death in life, seeking a land of exile elsewhere. [...] But hold you ever in readiness, for the end of the world that we have known is at hand. (*Silmarillion*, p. 276)

The end of the world that we have known is at hand. And what of the God of that world? A deity who could permit such senseless, cosmos-shattering violence was - is - simply no longer credible to many people, perhaps especially those like Tolkien who served on the front lines and witnessed the pointless slaughter of their friends and countrymen.

Tolkien, famously, did not abandon his Roman Catholicism. But given his identification with the dreamer-protagonists of *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*, and given the identification of those dreamer-protagonists with Elendil, it seems reasonable to suggest that Elendil is a

figure with whom Tolkien felt a special kinship. Like him, and like the Prophet Jeremiah, Tolkien was a devout believer who was forced by unendurable circumstances to square his belief in a good and just God with an evil and unjust world. If one is inclined to look, there are obvious parallels between Númenor and 'Little England' as Tolkien imagined it: a western island of great spiritual and aesthetic attainments, whose apostasy from the true faith (i.e., Roman Catholicism) coincided precisely with its imperial ascendancy and the persecution of the remaining 'Faithful' as a religious minority. As a Protestant minister and theologian, I might quibble with Tolkien where 'apostasy' is concerned. However, it would constitute intellectual dishonesty bordering on self-delusion for me to dispute Protestantism's central role as both cause and effect of the rise of modern capitalist Empire. In true prophetic fashion, Tolkien saw his beloved homeland's colonial ambition not as a mark of its greatness but rather as evidence of its moral and spiritual failure (Boyle, pp. 252–4). It was precisely these colonial ambitions, shared by the other European powers - Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox alike, secular as well as religious - that precipitated the crisis which left the old world in ruins and tens of millions of human beings dead.

Read in its proper historical and religious context, the *Akallabêth* - the one authored by Tolkien that is, and not merely the one which exists in the textual tradition of his invented world - can be understood as a modern exercise of what the theologian Walter Brueggemann calls *prophetic imagination*. In his formulation, the prophet is one who mobilizes the symbolic and narrative resources of the community to whom they prophesy, drawing on ancient traditions to give contemporary expression to long-suppressed fears and grief, 'speak[ing] metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us' (Brueggemann, p. 46). The prophet does not merely diagnose evil and proclaim divine judgment. Rather, the prophet's ultimate call is to repentance, for the people to change their destructive ways and come back into alignment with their highest values: 'prophetic ministry has to do not primarily with addressing specific public crises but with addressing, in season and out of season, the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated' (p. 3). Is this not what Tolkien is up to with his *Akallabêth*? As I observed in my introduction, the Downfall of Númenor draws upon a veritable laundry-list of familiar narratives both ancient and modern, secular and sacred: the rise and fall of ancient civilizations, legends of drowned lands, biblical resonances from Genesis down to Revelation. Tolkien engages the symbolic repertory of his culture to say something urgent about the devil's bargain his beloved England has made in modernity - but his prophetic imagination does not address itself to his time only. At the July 2023 Tolkien Society seminar *Númenor, the Frail and Mighty*, held in the midst of the hottest summer on record (so far), scholars Journée Cotton and Erik Jampa Andersson both framed Númenor as an eco-myth, a Tolkienian prophecy against the dangers

of ecocidal imperialism and the ends to which it will lead if we do not change our ways. It is hardly a coincidence that the earliest version of imperial Númenor features unmistakably industrialized war machines (*Lost Road*, p. 67). Climate catastrophe is the (il)logical outcome of the same industrializing, militarizing colonial project which the legends of Númenor critique with such mythic force. In the primary world, God's direct intervention in history is hardly needed to punish Empire for its hubris; the laws of chemistry and of tragedy will take care of that.

I submit that Tolkien's legendarium as a whole can be read as a work of prophetic imagination: a mythopoetic confrontation with the reality of inexplicable suffering and the cascading crises of modernity, an urgent invitation to pull back from the abyss. This is true not only of the *Akallabêth*, but of the earliest narratives of Middle-earth we have. The fact that Tolkien wrote 'The Fall of Gondolin' whilst convalescing from trench fever in 1917 has taken on an almost legendary quality: a portrait of the artist as a young man, making sense of war by means of myth. John Garth has recently shown that the 'Music of the Ainur,' long thought to date from sometime in 1918–1919, can actually be dated to the same period in early 1917 when Tolkien wrote 'The Fall of Gondolin' and 'The Cottage of Lost Play' (Garth, pp. 103–4). This is significant because, among other things, the 'Music of the Ainur' provides a cosmogonic theodicy. Melkor's rebellion introduces evil into the history of Arda, but evil will not have the final word. Like dissonance resolving to the tonic chord, Melkor's discord will be providentially woven back into the Music of Creation. As Ilúvatar says in the version of the 'Music' that was published in the 1977 *Silmarillion*:

And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined. (*Silmarillion*, p. 17)

This is, almost word-for-word, what Tolkien wrote in what we now know to be early 1917, in the very shadow of the war that cost him two of his closest friends: 'Thou Melko shalt see that no theme can be played save it come in the end of Iluvatar's [sic] self, nor can any alter the music in Iluvatar's despite. He that attempts this finds himself in the end but aiding me in devising a thing of still greater grandeur and more complex wonder' (*Lost Tales I*, p. 55). From the very beginning, Tolkien's prophetic imagination was grappling with this, perhaps monotheism's single most intractable conundrum. Whether his musical theodicy of dissonance and reharmonization, accomplished by the mysterious workings of Providence, provides a more compelling response to the problem of evil than the *Akallabêth* is up to the reader. It is worth noting that the Downfall of Númenor is Eru's sole direct intervention in the affairs of Arda; otherwise, his activity in history is much more subtle when it is detectable at all. All this points to the theological richness

of the Tolkienian corpus, where multiple perspectives coexist and questions are posed without offering, or even requiring, conclusive answers. This is a feature it shares with the Bible - a fact too often forgotten about both.

Such openness is more important than ever in the changing religious landscape of the twenty-first century. According to a recent Gallup poll, the year 2021 marked the first time in history that fewer than 50 percent of Americans claimed membership in a religious community (Jones). UK figures tell the same tale: according to the Office for National Statistics, for the first time ever in 2021, fewer than half (46.2 percent) of English and Welsh identify as Christian, whereas fully 37 percent claimed no religion at all (Roskams). This suggests that Tolkien's contemporary Anglophone audience is increasingly nonreligious, in step with the rest of the population. Meanwhile, as of writing, Amazon Prime is well underway in adapting the Second Age of Middle-earth for the silver screen with the billion-dollar *The Rings of Power*. How the studio intends to portray the Downfall of Númenor, with its central motif of a God who condemns an entire continent to controlled demolition, in a television program aimed at the broadest possible range of twenty-first century viewers, remains to be seen. It points to the continued relevance of the theological questions Tolkien was asking, challenging us as readers and scholars to grapple responsibly with the answers he offers - and pose some questions of our own.

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