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Hear, O Númenor!: The Covenantal Relationship of the Dúnedain with Ilúvatar

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Middle-earth, surprisingly to some who are aware of the firm Catholic faith professed by its creator J.R.R. Tolkien, appears on its surface to be a distinctly areligious world. Despite claims that Middle-earth is a "fundamentally religious [...] work", Tolkien admits to having "not put in, or [having] cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices" (Letter 142), for the most part leaving his created races without any form of organized religion or particular relationship with the divine. He stipulates clearly in another letter that "there are thus no temples or 'churches' or fanes in this 'world' among 'good' peoples" and that these races "had little or no 'religion' in the sense of worship" (Letter 153). The inhabitants of Middle-earth have "no theology, no covenant, and no religious instruction"; they must do "without ritual, revelation, doctrine, indeed without God" (Madsen, 1988), guided only by a "natural theology" - the oft-quoted "light from an invisible lamp" (Letter 328) - unmediated by an institutional Church (Mitchell, 2013). The integration of Tolkien's personal philosophy into his works despite this apparent lack of religiosity is widely discussed among scholars of Tolkien; however, this intense focus on Tolkien's technique of absorbing the religious elements into the story risks obscuring the rare, explicit references to religious practice that are left behind. In particular, a notable exception to the agnostic rule is the Dúnedain of *The Lord of the Rings* and their predecessors the Númenoreans. Particular focus should be placed on the "theistic religion in Second Age Númenor" (Mitchell, 2013), the practices and beliefs of which are emphasized throughout the *Akallabêth*, in the various accounts of Númenor in *Unfinished Tales*, and in the culture of their descendent state Gondor. The Dúnedain are characterized as strict "monotheists [...] like the Jews" (Letter 156), "believ[ing] in The One, the true God, and [holding] worship of any other person an abomination" (Letter 183). Therefore, Tolkien clearly claims that "in theology [...] they were Hebraic". Alhough not institutionalized, this particular and special relationship the Númenoreans share with Ilúvatar within Middle-earth parallels the covenantal relationship with God that distinguishes the Biblical nation of Israel. Were a certain group to be marked upon Middle-earth as the "chosen people" of Ilúvatar, the Dúnedain would take the title.

This article will analyze the narrative and technical methods that Tolkien uses to establish the parallels between Númenor and Israel, with special focus given to the textual similarities between the *Akallabêth* and the Biblical Exodus narrative and the critical etiological position each holds within its respective culture. In addition, this article will assess how the Númenorean practice of invocation of Ilúvatar in oaths and vows illustrates not only a cultural reverence but an expectation of a personal relationship between each Dúnadan and Ilúvatar; how the three Númenórean festivals parallel the three Jewish *shalosh regalim*; and how the chosen Númenorean holy places, which are located upon mountains considered sacred, evoke the many sacred mountains discussed within the Bible.

The founding narrative of the Dúnedain of Middle-earth is the *Akallabêth*, which tells the tale of the migration of founders Elendil, Isildur, and Anárion from the destruction of Númenor to the western shores of Middle-earth, where they found the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor. This myth is essential to the Gondorian and Arnorian identity through the Third Age – Faramir considers the Gondorians as members of the "High [...] Men of the West, which were Númenóreans" (*Two Towers* pp. 887) and proves its familiarity in all of Gondor with the ease with which he cites the Downfall of Númenor to Éowyn in the chapter "The Steward and the King" of *The Return of the King*. In comparison, the story of Exodus is also a "charter myth," which "tell[s] the story of a society's origins" (Sparks, 2010) – in this case, the society of Israel. Exodus is understood to teach "that Israel is fundamentally a society delivered from slavery by Yahweh and therefore a nation that covenantally belongs to him" (Sparks, 2010), "function[ing] as a founding myth in the evolving of Israelite and early Jewish identity" (Bosman 1).

When Tolkien scholarship engages with the *Akallabêth*, it is most frequently through an Atlantean lens. The *Akallabêth* is considered a "[combination of] the myth of the Golden Age with the Atlantis legend" (Christopher and Hammond, 1993), and therefore "the myth of Atlantis re-created" (Monteiro, 1993). However, though the Atlantean inspiration is unmistakable, it is not absolute, and in the creation of Númenor Tolkien "combined [the Atlantis myth] with Judeo-Christian myth" (Christopher and Hammond, 1993). Tolkien describes the escape of the Faithful from the destruction as "a kind of Noachian situation" (Letter 156) and Elendil, their leader, as "a Noachian figure". Oliviera and Marques elaborate on this, emphasizing how both Noah and Elendil are characterized as just men who are similarly instructed to prepare a vessel or vessels in which to save a portion of the pre-diluvian world, and who "manage to survive" the ensuing flood due to being "helped by the gods" (Oliviera and Marques, 2019).

However, when the events of the *Akallabêth* preceding the destruction of Númenor are taken into account, another Biblical inspiration becomes apparent. Tolkien was extensively familiar with the Book of Exodus, having lectured on the Old English Exodus "regularly throughout the 1930s and 1940s" (Lavinsky, 2017) and subsequently "incorporated [his commentary] into an edition published by Joan Turville-Petre in 1982" (Lavinsky, 2017). [1] The narrative structure of the *Akallabeth* and the turns of phrase with which Tolkien characterizes the rebellion of the Númenorean ruling house both bear greater parallels to the Biblical Exodus narrative rather than the story of Noah, betraying a strong Exodean inspiration for Númenor as well.

First, both the *Akallabêth* and the Exodus story begin and end with a migration from, and then back to, an ancestral homeland. At the start of the

[1] We are grateful to one of the anonymous readers for bringing this point to our attention.

Akallabêth, once the island of Númenor is created, "the Edain set sail upon the deep waters [... and] came at last to the land that was prepared for them, Andor, the land of Gift, [...] they went up out of the sea and found a country fair and fruitful" (*Silmarillion* pp. 311). In comparison, the narrative of Exodus also begins with the migration of the nation of Israel from their homeland in Canaan down to Egypt to escape a famine: "They also took their livestock and the goods that they had acquired in the land of Canaan, and they came into Egypt, [...] all his offspring he brought with him into Egypt" (Gen. 46.6-7). Once resettled, "the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong" (Exod. 1.7). Both peoples have thus found success within their new settlements, and rapidly colonize the land to which they have migrated. However, in each episode, this bounty and success fails to last, for "a cloud [gathers] on the noon-tide of Númenor" as their kings Tar-Ciryatan and Tar-Atanamir arise and choose to seek for power. They oppress the peoples of Middle-earth, and eventually even the Faithful in their own realm, turning away from goodwill with Ilúvatar for their own purposes. In a similar way, a shift occurs at the beginning of the Exodus myth from the success of the Israelites to their oppression, when "a new king arose over Egypt, [who] set taskmasters over [the Israelites] to oppress them with forced labor" (Exod. 1.8-11).

The wording Tolkien chooses to describe the defiance and the turning away of the Númenóreans from Ilúvatar is clearly meant to parallel the descriptions of the Egyptians in the Exodus myth, thereby establishing Ar-Pharazôn and his King's Men as the Pharaoh and Egyptians of the *Akallabêth*, while the Faithful are set up as the Hebrews – oppressed and punished by the King's Men for maintaining their faith in the Valar and in Ilúvatar.. Thrice in the *Akallabêth* are the people of Númenor or Ar-Pharazôn himself described as hardening or having hardened their hearts. The first occurs just prior to Ar-Adûnakhôr's ascension under this over-proud title, when it is stated "in those days the Shadow grew deeper upon Númenor, and the lives of the Kings of the House of Elros waned because of their rebellion, but they hardened their hearts the more against the Valar" (*Unfinished Tales* pp. 320). The King's Men are later stated to "[harden] their hearts" and "[shake] their fists at heaven" in response to the approach of the clouds in the form of eagles (*Sil* pp. 332), and finally Ar-Pharazôn himself "hardened his heart, and he went aboard his mighty ship, Alcarondas" and proceeds to war against the Valar. This repetition of the phrase is a clear allusion to the repeated references within the Exodus story to Pharaoh's heart becoming hardened, whether by the power of God – "I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go" (Exod. 4.21) – or by his own actions – "But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them" (Exod. 8.15).

Prior to the final downfall, both kingdoms also suffer from a preemptive divine judgment, with the clear intent of turning the kingdom's actions away from their rebellion against the will of God and the oppression of God's people. The land

of Númenor suffers in the days of Ar-Pharazôn from "storms of rain and hail, and violent winds" (*Sil* pp. 331-32), and lightning, which "increased and slew men upon the hills, and in the fields, and in the streets of the city" (*Sil* pp. 332), and lastly earthquakes and "smoke [which] issued from the peak of the Meneltarma" (*Sil* pp. 332). These events are described as portents, and it is heavily implied that their intent is to pressure the Númenóreans to cease their oppression and turn back to the will of Ilúvatar. Similarly, in the Exodus story, the failure of Pharaoh to assent and to let the people of the Hebrews go is met with God "multiply[ing His] signs and wonders in the land" (Exod. 7.3) by sending upon Egypt the ten famous plagues. The seventh plague in particular is practically identical to the disastrous weather received by Númenor, it too being composed of hail and deadly lightning: "and the LORD[2] sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. And the LORD rained hail on the land of Egypt, [...] hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it [and] the hail struck down everything that was in the open field throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal" (Exod. 9. 23-25). The ninth plague, the plague of darkness, also may have served as an inspiration for the threat upon Númenor, for the clouds in the forms of eagles "[blot] out the sunset" and bring "uttermost night" over the land (*Sil* pp. 332), akin to the three-day night that falls upon Egypt. These plagues too are intended to pressure Pharaoh into acquiescing to God's will and releasing his chosen people.

Yet both Ar-Pharazôn and Pharaoh choose not to heed these warnings. Therefore, both tales finally end with the destruction of the oppressors in a display of God's divine power, ending with their drowning and the flight of the chosen nation back to their ancestral homeland. In the *Akallabêth*, in response to the assault of Ar-Pharazôn upon Valinor, "Ilúvatar showed forth his power [...] and a great chasm opened in the sea between Númenor and the Deathless Lands [...] and the fleets of the Númenóreans were drawn down into the abyss, and they were drowned and swallowed up forever" (*Sil* pp. 334). But Elendil and the Faithful are spared, borne away upon a strong wind "roaring from the west" (*Sil* pp. 335) that "cast[s] them away upon the shores of Middle-earth" (*Sil* pp. 335-36), whence they had come originally and where they "after [found] kingdoms" (*Sil* pp. 336). This destruction of Ar-Pharazôn's fleet in water parallels the legendary parting of the Red Sea, wherein "the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind [...] and the waters were divided" (Exod. 14.21), allowing the Israelites to pass, but when the Egyptians seek to follow them "the sea returned to its normal depth, [and] the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh" (Exod. 12.27-28). The delivered Israelites proceed to re-enter Canaan in Joshua 3, and take it as their land. Both myths bear the theme of God's ultimate power, his safekeeping of his chosen

[2] LORD given in small capital letters indicates the traditional manner of rendering into English the Tetragrammaton.

people, and his justice against their enemies. These extensive similarities between both the Dúnedain and Israelite foundation myths bring the latter to mind in the reading of the former, developing a conception of Númenor that is at one and the same time "ancient Israel which, at the time of the monarchy (c. 900 BC) forsook the iconless cult of Yahweh (Eru on Meneltarma) for idolatry, and Israel of the Exodus, with the flight of Elendil/Moses and the remaining faithful" (Manni n.p). In this way, the Dúnedain are implied to be equivalently special to Ilúvatar as Israel is to Yahweh, and fundamentally a society protected by their faith in and ultimately answerable only to him, bound by their "one loyalty" to him in return (*Sil* 330).

Another way in which the Dúnedain's particular and covenantal relationship with Ilúvatar is demonstrated is through their practice of invoking Ilúvatar in the taking of oaths and vows. The clearest demonstration of this practice is given in *Unfinished Tales* in "Cirion and Eorl" in the oath with which Cirion seals the alliance between Gondor and the Éothéod (the forerunners of the Rohirrim) following its establishment at Halifirien: "This oath shall stand in memory of the glory of the Land of the Star, and of the faith of Elendil the Faithful, in the keeping of those who sit upon the thrones of the West and *of the One who is above all thrones for ever*" (*UT* pp. 395, emphasis mine). It is followed by a statement that "such an oath had not been heard in Middle-earth since Elendil himself had sworn alliance with Gil-galad" (*UT* pp. 395), and a footnote that indicates it was repeated in the Fourth Age by Aragorn and Éomer (*UT* pp. 410).

This episode can be clearly contrasted with the only other time in the entirety of the Legendarium is another oath taken that invokes Ilúvatar as a witness or a party - the Oath of Fëanor, sworn "by the name even of Ilúvatar" (*Sil* pp. 89). Such an oath is, apparently, unprecedented in Elvish or Valarin culture up until that point, in that the narration of *The Silmarillion* calls it "a terrible oath" that "none shall break, and none should take" (*Sil* pp. 88), and claims that "many [presumably Noldor] quailed to hear the dread words" (*Sil* pp. 89). Within Noldorin culture, therefore, it is clear that any invocation of Ilúvatar is considered of great import and potentially an over-reaching of the oathtaker's expectations – the question of Maedhros, "how shall our voices reach to Ilúvatar beyond the Circles of the World?" makes it very clearly evident that the Eldar do not hold an expectation of a cultural or a personal relationship with Ilúvatar, and that therefore the taking of oaths in his name is condemned in that it hubristically presumes such a relationship (*Sil* 304). In contrast, there is no such evidence to suggest that Cirion's invocation of Ilúvatar in his oath is in any way unexpected or abnormal for such a situation in Gondorian culture – in fact, it is stated that "it had been held lawful only for the King of Númenor to call Eru to witness" (*UT* pp. 410), implying that in certain contexts the invocation of Ilúvatar is *expected*, to the extent of being legalized. Although Tolkien stipulates that the Edain and Númenoreans have acquired much of their culture and knowledge from the Eldar, the vastly different cultural contexts

surrounding such behaviour illustrate that this practice likely arose separately in the Dúnedain's monotheistic worldview. While the elves view Eru Ilúvatar as extremely distant from the affairs of the inhabitants of Middle-earth, the Dúnedain view him in a much more present and personal light. He is a being invested in them, with whom they may communicate and establish a relationship, and upon whom they may depend to be their guarantor in matters justifying sacred vows.

This practice of invoking God in oath-taking is also very clearly attested in the Bible. A total of fourteen verses imply that it was a common practice in Israelite culture to make vows to or by the name of the Lord, some of which charge the people to make said vows – "The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear" (Deut. 6.15) – and some which condemn making such vows falsely or rashly – "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name" (Exod. 20.7). This is paralleled in the Dúnedain practices, serving to link the Dúnedain and Israelite traditions and emphasize the close and personal relationship of the Dúnedain with Ilúvatar in choosing him as a witness for their oaths.

Furthermore, the Númenórean holidays described in *Unfinished Tales* drive home this personal relationship and display additional similarities between Dúnedain religious culture and the Israelite covenantal faith. In keeping with Tolkien's desire to avoid introducing organized religion into Middle-earth, the Eru-worship of the Númenóreans (before they turn to the worship of Melkor in response to Sauron's evangelization) mainly has a personal focus, the extent of its organization being the timing of the three festivals "when the king established his dialogue with god" (Monteiro, 1993): Erukyermë ("Prayer to Eru"), which takes place in the spring; Erulaitalë ("Praise of Eru"), which takes place at midsummer; and Eruhantalë ("Thanksgiving to Eru"), which occurs in the autumn. The fact that there are three of these major festivals, and the timing of the festivals, matches up neatly with the three Jewish *shalosh regalim*, or pilgrimage festivals, which are so called because families were supposed to travel to Jerusalem for the celebrations (Gibbard n.d.). The first of these within the Jewish calendar is Sukkot, which is a harvest celebration that takes place in the autumn, [3] like to Eruhantalë. It is followed in the spring by the festival of Passover (Pesach), which, although primarily intended "to recall the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt and to symbolize their liberation", "may have originally begun as a springtime harvest festival of renewal" like to Erukyermë (Molloy, 2002). Finally, following Passover is the summer festival of Shavuot, which "began as a summer grain-harvest festival" (Molloy, 2002) and "today, also marks the beginning of summer", like to Erulaitalë (Gibbard n.d.). Indeed the Númenórean festivals are also festivals of pilgrimage, in that the

[3] The Jewish calendar begins in the Northern Hemisphere's autumn and is a lunar calendar; therefore, the possible dates for the holy days vary with respect to the Gregorian solar calendar (Molloy 322).

Númenóreans proceed in a congregation up to the Meneltarma: "at these times the King ascended the mountain on foot followed by a great concourse of the people, clad in white and garlanded, but silent" (*UT* pp. 214). This alignment of the festivals times and themes draws a further parallel between Númenórean and Israelite cultures, bringing to the mind of a reader of the *Akallabêth* the many rituals and celebrations that Judaism dedicates to God, while the practice of having these God-directed festivals sets the Dúnedain apart from the other areligious races of Middle-earth.

Finally, a parallel is drawn between the Dúnedain's relationship with Ilúvatar and the Israelites' relationship with God in their practice of holding mountains as sacred places. Although Edwin Bernbaum claims that the concept of the sacred mountain holds "great importance for a wide variety of people and groups" (2006), in Western culture, the idea of the sacred mountain brings immediately to mind "Mounts Zion and Sinai [which] function as places of worship in Judeo-Christian traditions" (Bernbaum, 2006). Within Middle-earth, this practice does not appear to be spread across "a wide variety of people and groups" as in the real world – the elves do not seem to hold any places especially sacred, the dwarves hold caves in much higher esteem spiritually, and very little is given to suggest any sacred places exist among hobbits, ents, or orcs. However, there is a very clear tendency towards the reverence of sacred mountains in Númenor and Gondor, the Númenóreans, "like the Jews (only more so)" choosing the Meneltarma as their "one physical center of 'worship'" (Letter 156), and the Dúnedain of Gondor having hallowed the Halifirien and Mindolluin mountains in the Ered Nimrais range. The Meneltarma is the eldest, and receives its description early in the *Akallabêth*, prior to the description of Númenor's developing culture. "In the midst of the land was a mountain tall and steep, and it was named the Meneltarma, the Pillar of Heaven, and upon it was a high place that was hallowed to Eru Ilúvatar, and it was open and unroofed, and no other temple or fane was there in the land of the Númenóreans" (*Sil* pp. 312). It is the first mountain that has been hallowed in all the mortal lands of Middle-earth and may have served as an impetus for the later hallowing by the Gondorians of the mountain at the midpoint of *their* realm, the Halifirien. In fact, "the name Halifirien meant in the language of the Rohirrim 'holy mountain'" (*UT* pp. 389), derived from Anglo-Saxon hálig-firgen (*UT* pp. 407), while its Sindarin name was Amon Anwar, "Hill of Awe" (*UT* pp. 399). These names serve to underscore the great reverence that these sites are afforded, the Meneltarma's translation as "Pillar of Heaven" implicitly associating it with the dwelling of Ilúvatar himself, while awe is, in English usage, frequently restricted to the divine or things considered of equivalent power.

Both the Meneltarma and the Halifirien mountains are characterized by a unique sense of profound silence. Within "A Description of Númenor" in *Unfinished Tales*, the silence of the Meneltarma's summit is described as being "so

great that even a stranger ignorant of Númenor and all its history, if he were transported thither, would not have dared to speak aloud" (*UT* pp. 214-15), while upon Halifirien in the days of Gondor "there lay a silence, and a man would find himself speaking to his comrades in a whisper, as if he expected to hear the echo of a great voice that called from far away and long ago" (*UT* pp. 389). This silence upon the mountains serves to link both the Meneltarma and Halifirien with Mount Horeb, [4] as an allusion to the Biblical encounter of the prophet Elijah with God there, where he comes upon first a storm, and then an earthquake, "and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19.12) – most commonly cited from the King James translation as the more evocative "still small voice" (1 Kings 19.12). In both cases, the silence is used to emphasize the sanctity of the mountain and is itself a representation of the presence of God there. The additional note that the men of Gondor may expect to hear a voice in this silence also links the Halifirien mountain to this episode, as Elijah has the same expectation and does hear the call of God on Horeb, reminding him that he is not the only holy man in all of Israel, and that God shall honour his covenant and purify the people (1 Kings 19.16-18). It also serves to call back to the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* found in *Morgoth's Ring* in *The History of Middle-earth*, which tells the tale of the very first contact between men and Ilúvatar and his first choosing of them. In that episode also Ilúvatar presents himself to the first Edain, from whom the Númenóreans descend, as a "Voice" that speaks to them in their hearts and "in the stillness of the night" (*MR* pp. 347), and as this "Voice" he lays upon them yet another claim: "Ye have abjured Me, but ye remain Mine" (*MR* pp. 347). The Meneltarma is even more closely associated with Sinai in that the description of its eruption at the destruction of Númenor strongly resembles the description of the theophany at Sinai in Exodus – in fact, several scholars believe that "the biblical descriptions of the theophany at Mt. Sinai described volcanic activity" (Hoffmeier, 2005). The Meneltarma erupts in a burst of fire, "a mighty wind and a tumult of the earth" at the release of Ilúvatar's power, while at the theophany at Sinai "[the mountain] was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently" (Exod. 19.18); the similarity of these displays additionally forms an association between the mountains as holy places.

To a Western audience, Mount Sinai-Horeb may be considered the quintessential holy mountain: the place upon which the law of God was first handed down and the people are claimed and consecrated by God. Zion too is a holy mountain in Israelite tradition, as "the site of the ancient Jewish Temple" (Bernbaum, 2006). Lynch claims that "in many OT [Old Testament] texts, Mount Sinai and later Mount Zion are understood to symbolize [both] the redemptive

[4] Most scholars consider Sinai and Horeb to be alternate names for the same mountain and may render the names together as Sinai-Horeb to avoid confusion (Gray 150).

victories [by which Yhwh claimed Israel] and Yhwh's universal kingship" (Lynch, 2008). Zion especially "was sometimes simply called 'my holy mountain'" to emphasize its role as a sacred site to the Israelites (Lynch, 2008). Mount Moriah is also included as a holy mountain in the Biblical tradition as the site of the reaffirmation of the Abrahamic covenant and the traditional site of the Jewish temple; the two ultimately came to be identified with each other. In a similar way, the Meneltarma and Halifirien are used, in their silence and inviolability, to symbolize the sovereignty of Ilúvatar, "the One who is above all thrones forever" (*UT* pp. 395), and yet also as places to which men can ascend, to speak and to interact with him: a liminal space wherein the human and the divine may draw close. The concept of the holy mountain is therefore firmly associated with Abrahamic and Biblical Israelite culture, and the Dúnedain's continued choice of mountains as sacred places serves to emphasize their similarity with Israelite religion and relationship with God.

In conclusion, Tolkien uses many different techniques and allusions to draw parallels between the Ilúvatar-fearing religion of the Númenóreans and Dúnedain and the special relationship the Israelite nation shares with God in Biblical tradition. The characterization of the Dúnedain as strict monotheists (especially in contrast to the other races of Middle-earth), the structuring of their foundation myth the *Akallabêth* to mirror the narrative structure of the Exodus story, their practice of invoking Ilúvatar as witness to oaths, the nature of the Númenórean festivals, and the designation of mountains as sacred - thereby drawing parallels to Sinai, Zion, and Moriah - all serve to illustrate this relationship and their status as the "chosen people" of Ilúvatar within Middle-earth.

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