

Tolkien's Second Age: Rise and Fall
NRO
By Bradley J. Birzer

A review of J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Númenor*, ed. by Brian Sibley, with illustrations by Alan Lee (New York: William Morrow, 2022), xxxi + 296pp., maps. No index.

The man's creative genius and imagination really knew few if any limits. Though he began his larger mythology—what would become his massive legendarium—around 1913, J.R.R. Tolkien found great inspiration during World War I—seeking beauty beyond the horrors of the trenches at The Somme. The war, he claimed, “quicken[ed]” his mythology, and, much of it he wrote in “grimy canteens, at lectures in cold fogs, in huts full of blasphemy and smut, or by candle light in bell-tents, even some down in dugouts under shell fire.” Then, surviving the war, though not without depression and a deep survivor's guilt, he niggled at the legendarium throughout his adult life, leaving it incomplete upon his death in September 1973. Granted, he had published *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* as well as his justly famous lectures on Beowulf, on fairy stories, and on Sir Gawain, but it was his son Christopher who edited and published *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, *The Children of Húrin*, *Beren and Luthien*, and *The Fall of Gondolin*. Additionally, Christopher published Tolkien's academic and poetic work on Beowulf, on Germanic and Scandinavian mythology, and on King Arthur.

In other words, it took the lifetimes of two adult men to publish Tolkien's writings, and, even still, there are bits and pieces that remain unpublished. Since Christopher Tolkien's death in 2020, Carl Hostetter has masterfully edited Tolkien's *The Nature of Middle-earth* in 2021, and now we have Brian Sibley's excellent *The Fall of Númenor*, just out from William Morrow/Harper Collins.

Always, as Tolkien frequently noted in his private letters, he had the feeling of *recording* rather than *inventing* his legendarium. He did not actually believe that elves and Hobbits had lived, but rather that the truths of his mythology—the Fall, machinery for domination, evil and good, the crucial and voluntary sacrifice for the common good, etc.—really did exist. Tolkien “was constantly—and to his genuine surprise and delight—buffeted and redirected by the freewheeling, liberating inspiration of the creative imagination,” Sibley explains.

In the legendarium, Tolkien described the first three ages of the world, and offered a brief glimpse of the fourth. As Hostetter has so wisely argues, Tolkien's ages correspond almost exactly to St. Augustine's ages.

With this most recent volume, *The Fall of Númenor*, Sibley has beautifully and brilliantly done for Tolkien's Second Age what Christopher Tolkien did for the First Age. That is, *The Fall of Númenor* is the equivalent of *The Silmarillion*, a proper and compelling compilation of Tolkien's disparate stories and myths. Indeed, Sibley brings together pieces from *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Unfinished Tales*, *The History of Middle-earth*, *The Nature of Middle-earth*, and Tolkien's private letters to create a coherent and cohesive narrative of the Second Age.

While the First Age—as explored in detail in *The Silmarillion*—deals with the creation of the world and the fall of the Elves (after taking a blasphemous oath against the gods), the Second Age witnesses the absolute heights and the absolute nadirs of Men, gifted with the paradise of Númenor, Tolkien’s version of Plato’s Atlantis. Sibley explains:

The literal rise and fall of Tolkien’s island (for it had been initially raised from the sea as a gift to Men) was informed not just by Plato’s philosophical allegory on the politics of statehood but also by the Judeo-Christian narrative of the frailty and fallibility of mankind as related in the Biblical Boo of Genesis. This is evident in his description of The Downfall of Númenor as ‘the Second Fall of Man (or Man rehabilitated but still mortal.’

The gods (the Valar) gave Númenor as a gift to the houses of Men that had stood with them in their war against the Satan figure (Melkor/Morgoth) of the mythology. Though Morgoth has been restrained by the Valar, his will of evil remains as a tangible spirit in the physical world, corrupting whatever it touches, lessening the dignity of all creation. “Yet the lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, the Power of Terror and of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even unto the latest days,” Tolkien wrote. This, it proves, is one of the essential themes in all of Tolkien’s works, but especially in the Second Age. Sauron, the main bad guy of *The Lord of the Rings*, served as Morgoth’s lieutenant in the First Age, but then comes to the fore in the Second Age. “Sauron, however, inherited the ‘corruption’ of Arda, and only spent his (much more limited) power on the Rings; for it was the *creatures* of earth, in their *minds and wills*, that he desired to dominate. In this way,” Tolkien continued, “Sauron was also wiser than Melkor-Morgoth.”

Yet, there is something autobiographical about the story as well. Again, as Sibley writes: Tolkien’s

. . . fascination with his island creation and its eventual fate owed its origin, in part, to a recurring nightmare that began in early childhood and continued into adult life. In a letter, written in 1964, he described this experience: ‘The 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 up out of a quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands. It still occurs occasionally, though now exorcized by writing about it.

To make all this even more personal, the concept of Númenor emerged from a challenge he and C.S. Lewis made of one another, trying to write the kinds of stories that each would like but felt were largely absent in the world. After a “toss up,” Lewis wrote on Space, and Tolkien wrote on Time—that is, somehow going back to and witnessing the greatness as well as the fall of Atlantis. Tolkien wrote first “The Long Road,” about a successive father and son team-up throughout history, then he wrote “The Notion Club Papers,” an adventure story featuring the Inklings. Having failed to complete either manuscript, though, Tolkien incorporated Númenor into his larger mythology, thus creating the Second Age of his Middle-earth legendarium. Lewis, never shy, borrowed freely from Tolkien’s mythology, and Numinor (Lewis’s spelling) appears nine times in 1945’s *That Hideous Strength* as well as in one of Lewis’s poems, “The End of the Wine.” Obviously, it was a rich concept.

Critically, Tolkien's Númenóreans remain mortal despite being given very long lives. Additionally, the island of Númenor exists within sight of Avallónë (Avalon), an island home of the immortal elves, but the Númenóreans are banned from visiting the immortal lands. For Tolkien, mortality is a gift to men, a "fulfilment of their being," though it remains a mystery and burden to them as well, plaguing and confusing the Númenóreans over time, as they become increasingly bitter over death, jealous of the immortals.

In the glory days of Númenor, the Númenóreans became excellent mariners, the greatest the world ever seen, sailing and exploring the farthest reaches of the North, the South, and the East (Middle-earth). Only the West was closed to them because of the ban. At first, the Númenóreans came to Middle-earth as saviors, as teachers, and as providers. "And they revered the memory of the tall Sea-kings, and when they had departed they called them gods, hoping for their return," Tolkien explains. Of the greatest tales of *The Fall of Númenor*, the most well developed is the unfinished tale of Aldarion and Erendis, the story of a mariner-king who loves the sea more than his wife. Much of *The Fall of Númenor* recounts this tale. "A woman must share her husband's love with his work and the fire of his spirit, or make him a thing not loveable," observes a wise woman in the tale.

Further, the Númenóreans create strong alliances with the Elves against the evils of Sauron and the remaining creatures—orcs and other foul distortions—of Morgoth. Delving into the doings of Middle-earth as well in the Second Age, Tolkien notes the importance of the Elf, Galadriel, Gil-Galad, and Elrond. "In any case, Galadriel was more far-sighted in this than Celeborn; and she perceived from the beginning that Middle-earth could not be saved from the 'residue of evil' that Morgoth had left behind him save by a union of all the peoples who were in their way and in their measure opposed to him." Though Galadriel never formally deals with the Númenóreans, they became faithful allies of Gil-Galad and Elrond, recognizing their duty to aid the world against the evils of Morgoth and Sauron, remembering that they had first received their island because of their struggles in the First Age.

Relatively quickly, though, the Númenóreans descend to being merely imperial, overwhelming and exploiting the peoples and resources of Middle-earth rather than aiding them. All of this was tied to their frustration with the question of death. "Ever as their power and glory grew greater," Tolkien reveals, "their unquiet increased. . . . Thus it was that a shadow fell upon them: in which maybe the will of Morgoth was at work that still moved in the world. And the Númenóreans began to murmur, at first in their hearts, and then in open words, against the doom of Men, and most of all against the Ban which forbade them to sail into the West." Despite their power growing, their discontent and confusion increased. Thus, the Númenóreans rose and fell at the same time.

But the fear of death grew ever darker upon them, and they delayed it by all means that they could; and they began to build great houses for their dead, while their wise men laboured unceasingly to discover if they might the secret of recalling life, or at least of prolonging of Men's days. Yet they achieved only the art of preserving incorrupt the dead flesh of Men, and they filled all the land with silent tombs in which the thought of death was enshrined in the darkness.

Despite the anxiety, or, perhaps, because of it, the twenty-fifth king of Númenor, Ar-Pharazon the Golden desired “no less than the kingship of the world.” The Númenóreans divided into those who feared death and those who remained faithful to the Valar.

Yet, as Númorean power increased and they desired, blasphemously, to be “Lords of the West,” Sauron’s theocratic power grew in Middle-earth, too, for he ruled as a god-king. Mostly, Sauron rules through the Rings of Power—seven for dwarves, three for elves, nine for men, and one to rule them all. When Sauron and the Númenóreans challenge one another, however, Sauron relents and is taken to Númenor. There, through deceit and wiles, he became counselor of the king and the founder of a Morgoth-centric religion, one that worshipped darkness and feared, to the nth degree, death. Society began to crumble.

But for all this Death did not depart from the land, rather it came sooner and more often, and in many dreadful guises. For whereas aforesaid men had grown slowly old, and had laid them down in the end to sleep, when they were weary at last of the world, now madness and sickness assailed them; and yet they were afraid to die and go out into the dark, the realm of the lord that they had taken; and they cursed themselves in their agony. And men took weapons in those days and slew one another for little cause; for they were become quick to anger, and Sauron, or those whom he had bound to himself, went about the land setting man against man, so that the people murmured against the King and the lords, or against any that had aught that they had not; and the men of power took cruel revenge.

Sauron convinces the king to break the Ban and invade the immortal realms. Upon doing so, the Valar—through the permission of Ilúvatar (God)—cover the invading force with earth (they may be called upon to fight in the Apocalypse) and drown the island of Númenor. Those faithful to the Valar, under the leadership of Elendil, escape to Middle-earth, taking with them the great seeing stones, scrolls of wisdom and knowledge, and a young tree—and found the realms of Arnor in the north of Middle-earth, and Gondor in the south. Sauron, in the catastrophe of Númenor, lost his bodily form and returned, as a “shadow and a black wind over the sea” to Middle-earth. There, he returns to Mordor and rebuilds his armies. The kingdoms in exile, under Elendil, ally with Gil-Galad and Elrond to form the “Last Alliance” and overthrow Sauron. In the war, Sauron is defeated, but his ring—The Ring of Power—remains, and thus Sauron remains. The Second Age ends, and the world will be need to be saved yet again from the scourge of Morgoth and Sauron, but by other hands.

While the Second Age is not as well defined as the First or the Third Ages of Tolkien’s mythology, the great author certainly gave the Age its own drama. Even half a century after the author’s death, his imagination continues to delight and inspire, to offer us a mythology of the modern world, equivalent to that which Homer offered the Greeks, Virgil the Romans, and Dante the Medievals.

Bradley J. Birzer is Russell Amos Kirk Chair in American Studies and Professor of History, Hillsdale College. He is author of *J.R.R. Tolkien’s Sanctifying Myth* (2002) and *Tolkien and the Inklings: Men of the West* (forthcoming).