

Death and the Númenóreans: Is This Life All There Is?

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In Tolkien's world of Arda, elves are the elder children of Ilúvatar, also known as the One. Elves receive the gift of immortality and their spirits will remain with the world until its end. But Ilúvatar's younger children, men, are destined to be mortal. We see them, especially the men of Númenor, in

desperate struggle with their mortality at various moments throughout Tolkien's works. In these next pages I'd like to analyze and compare how two of the greatest men in Middle Earth's legendarium faced death and the motives they held for their choices at death's door.

But before we look at our two examples of attitudes before death (and life), it would be wise to see what Tolkien himself writes as the view or oral tradition of the elves about men and death at the beginning of *The Silmarillion*:

[Ilúvatar] willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein. [...] [T]he sons of Men die indeed, and leave the world; wherefore they are called the Guests, or the Strangers. Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy. But Melkor has cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought forth evil out of good, and fear out of hope. Yet of old the Valar declared to the Elves in Valinor that Men shall join in the Second Music of the Ainur; whereas Ilúvatar has not revealed what he purposes for the Elves after the World's end, and Melkor has not discovered it. (*The Silmarillion*, p.41-42)

So the elves say that man's death comes from God (Ilúvatar) and is in itself a good thing, though twisted by evil. And they suspect as well that death is not the end. For men, death is an essential element of being able to transcend the world they live in. So we need to keep in mind both freedom and the possibility of transcendence as we reflect on death and our prominent Númenóreans.

So, on to our case studies of men and mortality!

We can first consider the figure of Ar-Pharazôn, the greatest king of the greatest kingdom of men ever to have existed. Under him, the island kingdom of Númenor reached its zenith, bringing much of Middle Earth under its sway.

Now Númenor had been made by the Valar as a reward for the men who had faithfully battled alongside the elves in their struggle against Morgoth. They were taken apart from the rest and given the island of Númenor as their home, where they lived close to the undying lands belonging to the Valar and the elves. The elves would often sail to the island in friendship although men themselves were forbidden to travel to the undying lands.

Most Númenóreans eventually grew envious of the elves' immortality, but are told by the elves that since men are appointed to die by Ilúvatar, they should not try to take by force more than what had been given. Men complain of death's mystery: "For of us is required a blind trust, and a hope without assurance, knowing not what lies before us..." (*The Silmarillion*, p.265) Little by little they turn from friendship with the elves and their worship of Ilúvatar and start to search for ways to avoid death while living the present moment seeking pleasure and riches.

This sets the stage for the rise of Ar-Pharazôn, who, having served his king as a successful captain, marries the heiress of the kingdom by force and usurps the throne. Under the influence of Sauron, Ar-Pharazôn and Númenor turn to the worship of the Dark, offering human sacrifice in the hope of increasing their power (they do) and prolonging their lives (they don't).

Here we introduce our second figure, Elessar Telcontar, the last of the Númenóreans (cf. *The Lord of the Rings*, p.1037), also known as Aragorn. Like Ar-Pharazôn, he marries up, but not for the sake of winning a kingdom—rather, he wins the kingdom to become less unworthy of marrying his wife. Also like Ar-Pharazôn he is a great captain in his youth; but he is the true heir to the throne fighting in secret under someone who by right he should have commanded.

Aragorn refuses to be tempted by the possibility of power and long life offered by possession of the Ring—unlike Boromir, we see no sign of him coveting it for himself though he could easily take it. “If I was after the Ring, I could have it—NOW!” (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.168)

Ar-Pharazôn sacrifices human victims in order to increase his power and lifespan. In contrast, when he first meets Frodo, the mysterious ranger introduces himself: “I am Aragorn son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can save you, I will.” (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.168) We see that he means it often enough during their journeys. For example, when his strategically unimportant companions, Merry and Pippin, are captured by orcs, he goes off in pursuit. And at the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*, he leads his army out to battle Sauron in order to create a diversion to give Frodo and Sam a better chance to destroy the Ring. Aragorn knows that he has no possibility of a military victory against Sauron, yet he still chooses to give battle.

Back to Ar-Pharazôn. “But the years passed, and the King felt the shadow of death approach, as his days lengthened; and he was filled with fear and wrath.” (*The Silmarillion*, p.274) His might and ambition eventually lead him to rebel against the Valar and determine in his old age to conquer the undying lands of Valinor. At his fleet's arrival, the immortal elves flee before him. Ar-Pharazôn “sailed into forbidden seas, going up with war against the Deathless, to wrest from them everlasting life within the Circles of the World.” (*The Silmarillion*, p.278)

In the end he is utterly defeated: the earth opens up and swallows his numberless fleet, whereas Ar-Pharazôn and those who had disembarked with him in Valinor are trapped by a landslide, imprisoned under the earth until the end of time. So by a twist of fate he gets his wish of not dying.

Note the contrasts. To rescue the city of Gondor, Aragorn chooses to take the Paths of the Dead, a realm forbidden to mortals. He gambles everything on a prophecy that says Isildur's heir (Aragorn) will be able to pass, that there is a way through the Paths of the Dead, that there exists the possibility of an afterwards. He passes through, summoning the dead to fulfill their oaths and fight on his behalf. After reemerging from the Paths of the Dead, so great and terrible his visage with the dead marching in his wake that, as he passes at twilight, the people lock themselves inside. "Ever there arose the same cry in the gathering night: 'The King of the Dead! The King of the Dead is come upon us!'" (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.771)

With these two scenes, the following chart can help us specify the main similarities and contrasts:

Ar-Pharazôn	Aragorn
He claims the title "King of Men" (we can assume he meant <i>living</i> men) and tries to take by force what is not his by right.	He is given the title "King of the Dead." What he claims in this venture is his by right as Isildur's heir.
He goes motivated by fear.	He goes in spite of fear.
He invades a forbidden kingdom of immortals to escape death.	He invades a forbidden kingdom belonging to the dead in spite of likely losing his life.
Immortal elves flee his arrival.	The dead join and fight for him. Mortal men hide themselves at his arrival.
He invades by sea and is imprisoned (alive) underground in the land he invaded. There is no "after" for his invasion.	He invades by land in order to eventually win a fleet; he passes through and beyond the underground kingdom.

Perhaps we can see the key difference between the two kings looking at Aragorn's death scene. After a long life of two hundred and ten years, he realizes his time has come and lays himself

down peacefully to accept death, to “give back the gift.” (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.1037) His last words to Arwen his wife: “[L]et us not be overthrown at the final test, who of old renounced the Shadow and the Ring. In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!” (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.1038)

These two kings have completely different attitudes towards death, and this difference is because the first does not hope in the above-mentioned legend of the elves and men, in life after death. The second does.

To go deeper into the meaning of hope in Tolkien’s world, we should mention the “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth.” In an emotionally charged and philosophically profound dialogue between an elf and a mortal woman, Tolkien debates death and transcendence. Andreth, a wise woman, speaks of a legend, a rumor concerning mankind: “we had been born *never to die*. And by that, my lord, we meant: *born to life everlasting, without any shadow of any end*.” (*Morgoth’s Ring*, p.314) She thinks this destiny marred beyond repair.

Soon after comes an essential distinction between two kinds of hope:

‘What is hope?’ she said. ‘An expectation of good, which though uncertain has some foundation in what is known? Then we have none.’ ‘That is one thing that Men call “hope”,’ said Finrod. ‘*Amdir* we call it, “looking up”. But there is another which is founded deeper. *Estel* we call it, that is “trust”. . . . If we are indeed the *Eruhin*, the Children of the One, then He will not suffer Himself to be deprived of His own, not by any Enemy, not even by ourselves. This is the last foundation of *Estel*, which we keep even when we contemplate the End: of all His designs the issue must be for His Children’s joy. (*Morgoth’s Ring*, p.320)

Ar-Pharazôn has *amdir* when he musters his forces to attack Valinor and escape death. He places his hopes in what he knows, in his strength and strategy, seeking life within this world. He has ambition; he “looks up”. But Aragorn shows *estel* in the face of death—a trust that death is not the end, a trust founded in the One himself. This hope goes beyond survival instinct towards something much greater.

Will Aragorn’s hope be fulfilled? Is there anything beyond this life? I propose two reasons for the affirmative position.

First of all, for Tolkien myths are bearers of deep truth: “Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. . . .it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world.” (*Tree and Leaf*, p.88) Tolkien placing this rumor of life after death deep in the

mythology of Middle Earth surely argues in favor of its being true within the system of that world. For example, we have the prophecy that Aragorn relied on to allow him to enter the Paths of the Dead. He trusted it, and its words proved true.

Secondly, if we look at how Aragorn lived, in hope, we know that his life was noble, worthy, and selfless. Compared with Ar-Pharazôn, Aragorn was the better man, and that itself argues in favor of his worldview. Tolkien presents him as a living incarnation of hope. “[H]e was called Estel, that is ‘‘Hope’’.” (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.1032)

In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! we are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!”

“‘Estel, Estel!’ she cried, and with that even as he took her hand and kissed it, he fell into sleep. Then a great beauty was revealed in him, so that all who after came there looked on him in wonder; for they saw that the grace of his youth, and the valour of his manhood, and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together. And long there he lay, an image of the splendour of the Kings of Men in glory undimmed before the breaking of the world. (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.1038)

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