
Character Biography Morwë

By Oshun

Morwë, along with another Elf called Nurwë, whose names always and only appear together, is briefly referred in *The Annals of Aman* as one of the leaders of two kindreds of the Elves that became known as the Avari.

But the kindreds of Morwë and Nurwë were unwilling and refused the summons, preferring the starlight and the wide spaces of the Earth to the rumour of the Trees. Now these dwelt furthest from the waters of Kuiviénen, and wandered in the hills, and they had not seen Oromë at his first coming, and of the Valar they knew no more than shapes and rumours of wrath and power as they marched to war. And mayhap the lies of Melkor concerning Oromë and Nahar (that above were recalled) lived still among them¹

The idea that the Avari came not out of "refusers"--apart from the three kindreds who are best known as the Vanyar, Noldor, and Teleri--but from two other distinct clans led by Nurwë and Morwë was added very late and abandoned shortly thereafter, according to Christopher Tolkien.² In a footnote to the *Quendi and the Eldar*, he notes, in reference to how many of the Quendi departed for Aman in comparison to how many stayed behind (interestingly the majority), that "[t]he story found in the *Annals of Aman* of the kindreds of Morwë and Nurwë, who refused the summons of the Valar and became the Avari, had been abandoned."³

The Annals of Aman comprise two typescripts, the first of which Christopher Tolkien surmises was composed around 1958 and is said to be the work of the Noldorin loremaster Rúmil of Tirion (the same whose alphabet Fëanor lifted and refined/expanded).⁴ According to the second typescript, *The Annals of Aman* were described as the work of the Noldorin Exiles in Middle-earth, who later transmitted their version of this history to the Men of Númenor, and from Númenor this account was eventually incorporated into history as it was written in Arnor and Gondor.

The details of Tolkien's invented history of his world and the biographies of those who populated it are transmitted to the reader from a collection of various narratives. Some are presented as fact and others as legends, while others are transparently evident as made-up tales. The awakening of the Elves at Cuiviénen on the banks of a large inland lake, under starlight, although consistent in large part in the traditions of both the Amaryaran Elves and the Sindar, is described by Tolkien himself to be a children's tale.

The Awakening of the Elves is recounted in part in *Quendi and the Eldar*:

According to the legend, preserved in almost identical form among both the Elves of Aman and the Sindar, the Three Clans were in the beginning derived from the three Elf-fathers: *Imin*, *Tata*, and *Enel* (sc. One, Two, Three), and those whom each chose to join his following. So they had at first simply the names *Minyar* 'Firsts', *Tatyar* 'Seconds', and *Nelyar* 'Thirds'. These numbered, out of the original 144 Elves that first awoke, 14, 56, and 74; and these proportions were approximately maintained until the Separation.⁵

As Dawn Walls-Thumma points out that, when examining narrative bias in these texts, "Tolkien carefully constructed his legendarium as a tradition passed down by in-universe loremasters and narrators, [and] those loremasters and narrators possessed their own biases, and those biases shaped the narratives."⁶ The various segments of pieced-together texts that survived into Christopher Tolkien's version of *The Silmarillion*, or which are contained in the *Histories of Middle-earth*, are written with different purposes and from the points of view of distinct characters, each with their own particular experiences and prejudices.

Christopher Tolkien explains, in relation to the story of the awakening of the Elves, that

[a] form of this legend is found in a single typescript with carbon copy. On one copy my father wrote (and similarly but more briefly on the other): 'Actually written (in style and simple notions) to be a surviving Elvish "fairytale" or child's tale, mingled with counting-lore.'⁷

Therefore, even for the canon literalist, this tale of the awakening at Cuiviénen should not be considered as in-world historic fact. Unlike American Christians of various fundamentalist tendencies, Catholic scholars do not consider the Bible to be free of error in matters of history and science but only the stuff which is presumably needed for salvation (and this is left to Rome--canonical law and the Pope--to determine).⁸ One might deduce a similar logic is likely to have influenced Tolkien's created world and its mythology. It seems highly unlikely that Eldarin scholars and scientists would have considered the early retelling of the awakening at Cuiviénen to have presented them with an exact number of the original Elves or the precise circumstances of their early separations into different peoples.

But the numbers themselves may have been influenced by other myths and legends. The mythical 144, divisible by 3, 12, and 9, has obvious historical precedents. There are numerous works exploring the use of numbers in Norse mythology, for example. In a recent thesis, Norse scholar Li Tang discusses those mythic numbers:

It is generally agreed that some numbers such as three and nine which appear frequently in the two Eddas hold special significances in Norse mythology. Furthermore, numbers appearing in sagas not only denote factual quantity, but also stand for specific symbolic meanings. This tradition of number symbolism could be traced to Pythagorean thought and to St. Augustine's writing.⁹

The number twelve is familiar within the texts sacred to the both Jewish and Christian faiths. In the New Testament there are the twelve apostles of Christ, and much earlier, one encounters the tale of the twelve tribes of Israel. Novelist Howard Fast, in his recently published work on the history of the Jewish people, notes that, relating to account of twelve tribes of Israel, "12 was a magic number, a symbol-number, and even if we do a simple count out of the Bible, we come up with fourteen [tribes]," showing an emphasis on symbolism rather than precise quantification.¹⁰ These symbolic numbers are more common than uncommon in our primary world's myth and legend, so similar characteristics are not surprisingly found in Tolkien's invented world.

So where does the story of Morwë and Nurwë fit within all of this speculation about accuracy, or lack thereof, in the tale of the awakening of the Quendi and their participation in the march to the sea? Perhaps there could have been any number of different tribal groupings from which the last and greatest of the Elven kindred spilt and realigned over time to eventually form the ones

that are familiar to the reader of *The Silmarillion*. Out of any grouping or groupings, the Avari, or those who stayed behind, might have arisen. It would be logical to assume that the Avari could have found their central core among those settlements that developed farthest east of Cuiviénen, as is described in Christopher Tolkien's "Commentary on the Third Section of the Annals of Aman":

Only 'the most part' of the kindreds of Finwë and Olwë were willing to depart. [This writer as a cynic might tend to believe that at least some small minority of even the sainted Vanyar might have been "unwilling" as well.] The Avari were the kindreds of Morwë and Nurwë (and presumably those of the other kindreds who would not go); and an explanation is given of their not going: they dwelt furthest from Kuiviénen and had not seen Oromë at his first coming.¹¹

It perhaps makes more sense to leave out additional characters as Morwë and Nurwë. From a storytelling perspective and considering the nature of the evolution of folktales and myth, it might have felt better to Tolkien to leave the tale of the three-only original kindreds "as is" and the mystical number of 144 in place. (Not to mention what a charming idea it is that the children of the Quendi learned basic arithmetic from this legend.)

Finally, I would like to close with two recommendations of literature which I reread in writing this account. First, Verlyn Flieger has a plethora of outstanding passages in her *Splintered Light* where she considers how Tolkien plays with the concepts of light and darkness in his account of the history of the Elves.

The Avari are those Elves who reject the light and choose to remain in Middle-earth, "preferring the starlight ... to the rumour of the Trees" (Silm. 52). The word "rumour" is important. The Avari are unwilling to predicate action on the basis of a rumour, of something they have not themselves experienced. They have no faith. The difference that separates the skeptic from the believer thus divides the Avari from the High Elves. It will ultimately become the dividing line between light and dark. Fragmentation is underway.¹²

Angelica Ramses of the Silmarillion Writers' Guild wrote a wonderful article, [Name Calling: Group Identity and the Other among First Age Elves](#), which examines in fascinating detail the stratification among Elven society, which manifests prejudices and divisions strongly reminiscent of our real world divisions and conflict. One of my favorite points in her article is that there are two sides to the question of who are true to their roots and which kindreds do the abandoning:

The Avari, of course, had a radically different perception of the situation: rather than renegades they viewed themselves as the only true Elves. This is shown clearly by their languages: the word **Kwendi**, *the People*, and its derivations in the different Avarin dialects always referred to those who had stayed in Middle-earth, but never to Elves in general. In this way, the Avari also marked a clear distinction between themselves, those who had always held true to their origins, and the Eldar, the deserters.¹³

Here's a toast to Morwë and Nurwë the true Quendi!

Works Cited

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2. *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and the Eldar*.
3. Ibid, footnote 12.
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5. *The War of the Jewels, Quendi and the Eldar*.
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About the Author

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).