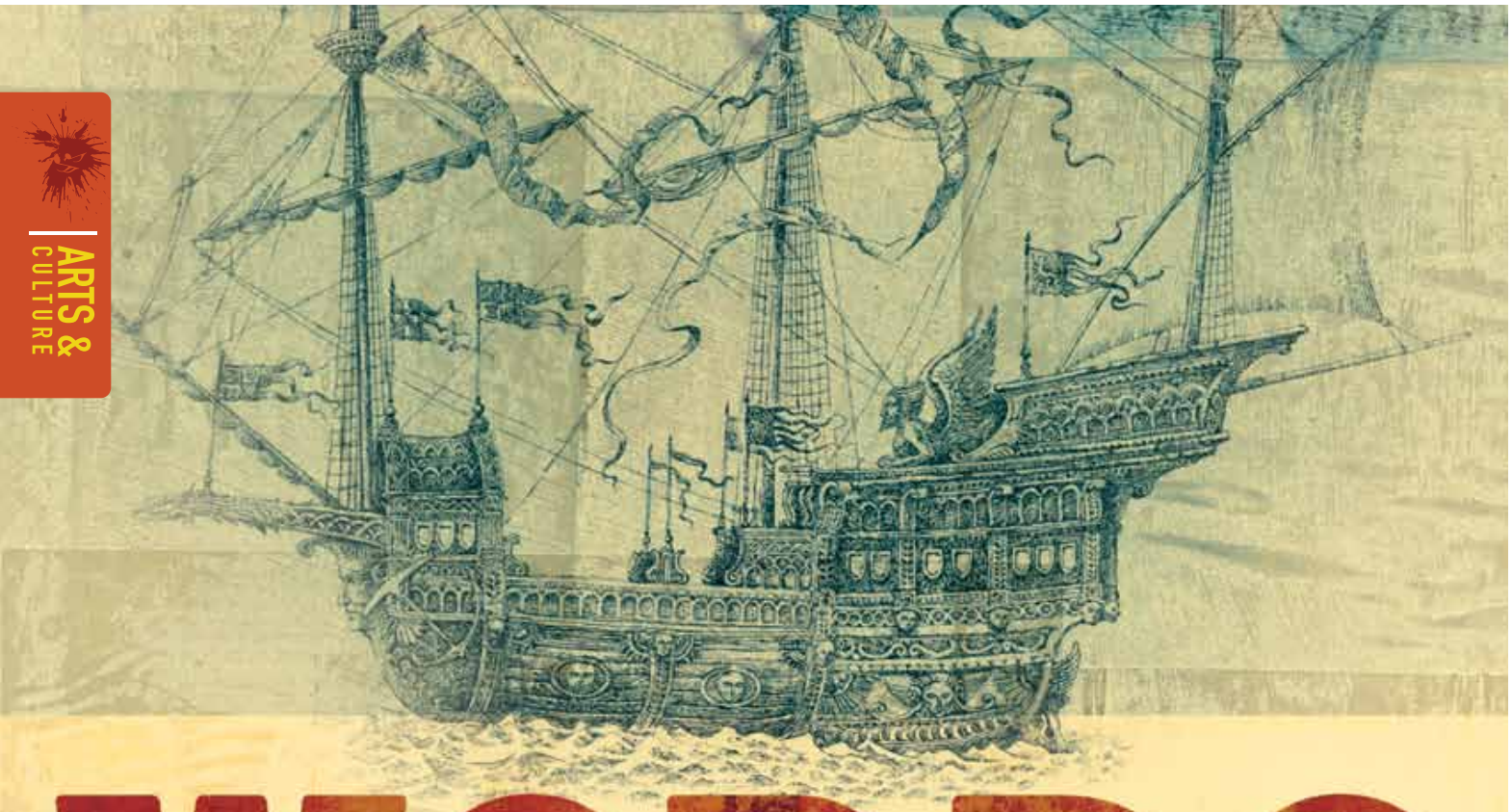

WORDS PICTURES AND IMAGINATION

BY MAGGI DAWN

One afternoon just before Christmas, I went with my son and some of his friends to see *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.*

The fifth (or third—depending on which camp you're in) volume of C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books was my favorite when I read the books as a child, and, as is always the case when you see a much-loved book transferred to the screen, I doubted the movie would do justice to the world of my imagination. But my fears were unfounded. The movie turned out to be a revelation rather than a disappointment, particularly by bringing the character of Eustace to life.

When we first encounter Eustace, he's a bad-tempered and unpleasant child who believes his intellectual powers are superior to those of his older cousins. Even after being magically transported into Narnia and encountering a series of talking animals, fantasy creatures and magical events, he stubbornly clings to his own, purely rational worldview.

Eustace's journey through Narnia is played out to great comic effect as he spews a steady stream of words denying what he sees. But when he eventually softens, he doesn't say a single word; instead, for the first time, his disapproving frown melts away as a smile crosses his face. That single, wordless expression reveals a vulnerable boy beneath all those layers of pride and insecurity and proves to be a turning point, not only for Eustace but for the whole plot.

Seeing the story instead of *reading* it left me thinking of two things: first, fantasy sometimes perfectly expresses some truth about the real world; second, a visual representation can sometimes speak more eloquently than words.

The movie left me feeling inspired, not because I now expected to meet talking animals but because Lewis's fantasy world still has the capacity to communicate truth about real life and the human condition. Coleridge once wrote that fantasy becomes believable if the writer threads into the story a sufficient quantity of material that seems familiar and resonates with the reader as being true to life. The "willing suspension of disbelief" is then triggered in the reader, and the fantasy becomes believable.

It's because we know such stories are mythical that we feel free to accept the implausible features of a fantasy world, along with the truth they convey about real life. But that capacity for seeing truth in implausible worlds is sometimes disabled when we read the Bible, primarily because we feel a sense of obligation to accept that all of its stories are factual. We may readily hear the whispers of God through a fantasy tale with a talking lion; yet when we encounter talking animals and winged creatures in the Bible, our sense of wonder is incapacitated, and instead we feel the desire to verify the facts.

I wonder, though, whether there is a place for the willing suspension of disbelief when we read some of the Bible's extraordinary tales. What might happen if, from time to time, we set aside our preconceived ideas about what a holy book ought to be and our concerns about how the Bible fits into a historical or scientific framework and simply allowed its stories to work as stories should? I'm not suggesting we relegate the Bible to the category of fiction. But if we can hear spiritual truth through a talking lion and the whispers of God in a movie as well as in a book, why should we not allow all our available reading strategies—including their translation into other media—to come into play when we find similar curiosities in the pages of Scripture?

Consider the Story of Jacob

Jacob's all-night wrestling match is a perfect example for us to consider.

> Seeing that he could not overpower Jacob, the man touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with him. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."
> Genesis 32:24–30

It's clear from Jacob's words that, after fighting all night, it isn't until morning that he comes to realize his opponent is not just another person but an

angel—or even God himself—in human form. The temptation for the modern reader is to be distracted into pondering questions as to the existence or non-existence of angels or whether it is plausible to think of Jacob meeting God in human form. But because those questions are superfluous to the story itself, it makes more sense to set them aside.

A painting by Delacroix shows Jacob setting upon the man in a no-holds-barred brawl, but Rembrandt's gentler interpretation of the same scene seems more like an elegantly choreographed dance. Is Jacob really putting up determined resistance, or is he engaged in game; not so much fighting to the death but more like a match to establish the supremacy of one player over the other? A quite different kind of engagement, though, is suggested in *Jacob and the Angel*, a huge marble statue created by Jacob Epstein, in which the two figures are apparently locked in an embrace rather than a fight, with Jacob hanging somewhat limply in the arms of his opponent. In the story it is Jacob who declares, "I will not let you go," but Epstein shows the God-man holding Jacob up with more of an air of intimacy than combat, suggesting the kind of wrestling that sometimes takes place between close friends or lovers, a struggle motivated less by the will to win than the need for physical proximity. Epstein's Jacob seems loved rather than vanquished, spent and at rest in the arms of God.

These three artists give us different ways of reading Jacob's story, but what they have in common is that they convey a sense of longing and active engagement on Jacob's part. None of them suggest that an encounter with God is either one of passive acceptance or a determined yet emotionally flat commitment. It isn't clear from Genesis whether Jacob's internal struggle is motivated by guilt, anger, a refusal to simply toe the line or a desperate longing for God. Whatever it is, it certainly isn't a meek and mild, cool and calm spirituality but a passion that combines both soul and body in an effort to break out of self and penetrate the divine.

Or Perhaps the Story of Mary

If we wanted a picture of calm acceptance, we might turn to the annunciation. Mary's obedience is typically interpreted as the quintessential portrayal of meek, mild acquiescence to the will of God. Yet here too, artists and poets read between the lines of tradition to suggest fresh readings that are still congruent with the scriptural account.

Luke tells us that when the angel Gabriel visits Mary she is "perplexed":

> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High…" "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God..." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word." Then the angel left her. Luke 1:26-38

Luke's account could be taken to imply that the conversation between Mary and the angel takes place in

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two minutes flat and that Mary's immediate response is a foregone conclusion. But two poems, both written in the 20th century, suggest that Mary's obedience is more deliberate and that she has both the time and the space to make a considered choice in response to Gabriel's announcement.

Edwin Muir, in "Annunciation," imagines the scene lasting through a whole afternoon, the ordinary things of life becoming background noise while Mary and the angel gaze into each other's faces until they seem to become each other's reflection. Muir suggests not only ample time for Mary to consider her choice but also that she is making a response to the presence and person of God, rather than merely weighing the pros and cons of a proposition. Thus, Muir captures the idea that a message from God is never an impersonal delivery of information, like an e-mail from the corporate office, but a meeting of persons. The significance of the angel's visit is not the angel himself, nor even the message he bears, but the fact that a connection is made between Mary and God.

While Muir's "endless afternoon" is perhaps rather romantic in tone, Australian poet Noel Rowe, in "Magnificat," describes the intensity of Mary's response to the angel in somewhat erotic terms: "…my heart, my heart, was wanting him,/reaching out, and taking hold of smooth-muscled fire." Rowe points out later[1] that he did not set out to be deliberately sensational, but the closest he could get to describing the depth of connection between human and divine was by analogy of the intimacy of lovers. Unlike Muir, Rowe places the depth and passion of Mary's meeting with the angel within a brief but timeless moment; one of those experiences where you are so absorbed in what is happening that you lose your sense of time passing. Rowe describes the experience as so profound that it feels lengthy—as if, in that moment, chronological time melts into *kairos*, time that is measured in depth and quality rather than in passing minutes.

Although Mary, unlike Jacob, is not recorded as struggling against her angel, we need not necessarily assume that her response is one of passive reception or that her mind or emotions are uninvolved in the process. Both poets suggest that Mary makes a choice, and both describe her agreement in terms of active longing for the presence of God, rather than a passionless agreement to a course of action.

The imagination is not only essential for reading; it is also what makes it possible for people to embrace change, which, more than anything, is what Jacob's and Mary's stories have in common. It's no coincidence that when they find themselves on the brink of enormous changes to their circumstances, the turning point is marked by an angelic encounter that startles them out of their old ways of thinking.

Not only for literary reasons, then, but in order to allow the Scriptures to shape our lives, we need to inhabit the stories, read between the lines and allow visual and poetic interpretations to jolt our minds out of their well-worn tracks. But for a generation that can hear the truth through C.S. Lewis's talking lion, perhaps that isn't too much to ask.

1. *Australian eJournal of Theology*, Issue 5, August 2005.

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