

## Christ the New Joshua. Retrieving Origen and Aquinas for Today

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*Abstract:* This essay examines the theme of Christ as the New Joshua, according to patristic literature (preeminently Origen) and then according to St. Thomas Aquinas. I show that Thomas Aquinas knows and adopts Origen's central insights regarding Christ as the New Joshua. The purpose of the essay is to suggest that the theme of Christ as the New Joshua should have a more central place both in contemporary Christology and in Thomistic Studies.

*Keywords:* Christ, Origen, Joshua, Jordan baptism, Promised Land

*Resumen:* Este ensayo examina el tema de Cristo como el Nuevo Josué según la literatura patristica (preeminentemente Orígenes) y luego según santo Tomás de Aquino. En él muestro que Tomás de Aquino conoce y adopta las ideas centrales de Orígenes sobre Cristo como el Nuevo Josué. El propósito del ensayo es sugerir que el tema de Cristo como el Nuevo Josué debería tener un lugar más central tanto en la Cristología contemporánea como en los estudios tomistas.

*Palabras clave:* Cristo, Orígenes, Josué, bautismo en el Jordán, Tierra Prometida

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### Introduction

In their multi-volume commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, W. D. Davies and Dale Allison remark: "Why did Jesus submit to John's baptism? Matthew's answer –'in order to fulfil all righteousness' (3.15)– has scarcely cancelled further discussion" (Davies & Allison, 2004, p. 321). David Friedrich Strauss (1892), for example, proposed that the answer must have been that Jesus wanted to be forgiven his sins. Although Allison and Davies do not presume to know the answer, they suggest that Jesus may have sought from the baptism of John "a seal of divine protection [...] from the imminent eschatological flood of fire" (2004, p. 323).

Drawing upon the Church Fathers and St. Thomas Aquinas, I will contend that the significance of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan was indeed eschatological. Among other things, Jesus was symbolizing a central aspect of his mission: to usher God's people into the true Promised Land, the kingdom of God. This kingdom has begun where Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, and Jesus calls his followers to join him in self-sacrificial love –so as to join him in Resurrection life. Jesus' baptism inaugurates the consummation of Joshua's leading the people into the Promised Land. Put simply, Jesus is the New Joshua whose *crossing* of the Jordan at his baptism opens up the kingdom of God, to which Christ's people come to belong through the sacrament of baptism instituted by Christ at his baptism.

Ultimately, the baptism that Jesus undergoes at the Jordan, and the sacrament of baptism to which he calls us, are inseparable from his dying and rising. At his baptism in the Jordan, his eschatological mission begins. This mission will lead him to the Cross –and the Resurrection. Christ's submersion in the Jordan leads into the true Promised Land. As Augustine says while arguing against Faustus the Manichean (who claimed that there is nothing in the Old Testament that “has to do with foretelling Christ”): “Let him see Jesus [i.e. Joshua of Nun and Jesus Christ] leading the people into the land of the promise” (2007, XII.31, p. 145).

In my essay's first section, guided by Jean Daniélou, I examine patristic approaches to Jesus as the New Joshua. Here Origen will be the key voice, but I examine other Church Fathers as well, such as Gregory of Nyssa. My second section turns to Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas recognizes the typological significance of Joshua's crossing into the Promised Land, and indeed he considers it the main *type* of Jesus' baptism and of the sacrament of baptism. In his later work, he draws explicitly on Origen on this topic. He therefore provides the core elements of a New Joshua Christology that can be expanded today by Thomistic Christology<sup>1</sup>.

### **Patristic Approaches to the New Joshua (Especially Origen's Approach)**

In *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, Jean Daniélou devotes a chapter to the typological connection between the sacrament of baptism and Joshua's crossing of the Jordan into the Promised

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<sup>1</sup> For contemporary historical-critical scholarship favoring Jesus' status as the New Joshua, see also Ounsworth (2012), Whitfield (2013), Koch (2010), Hays (2016, p. 116).

Land<sup>2</sup>. According to Daniélou, prior to Origen, the typological connection made by Christian thinkers was generally between baptism and the crossing of the Red Sea. This connection comes from 1 Corinthians 10:1-2: "I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea". For Paul, the miraculous, liberative, and life-saving crossing of the Red Sea is already an experience of baptism. The crossing of the Red Sea participates in baptism as a type, proleptically allowing faith-filled Israelites to enjoy its benefits –even if in the end that generation of Israelites fell short because they sinned against the Lord and were not allowed to reach the culmination of the exodus in the Promised Land. Indeed, Paul employs the Israelites' post-Red Sea sins as a warning to the baptized Christian Corinthians. Paul exhorts:

Now these things happened to them [the Israelites] as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (1 Cor 10:11-12)

The fact that the Israelites of Moses' generation (other than Joshua and Caleb) did not attain to the goal of the exodus means that the liberative and life-saving crossing of the Red Sea is not quite a full parallel with baptism<sup>3</sup>. For baptism truly unites us to Christ's Cross and Resurrection, and thus truly unites us to the triumphant risen and ascended Lord at the right hand of the Father, where even now we dwell with Christ. Paul urges, "If then you have been

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<sup>2</sup> See Daniélou (1960). Daniélou draws upon other scholars of his day, including Dölger (1930), Lundberg (1942), Duncan (1945). For more recent studies, see for example Wilken (1972), Brock (1985).

<sup>3</sup> The crossing of the Red Sea can nevertheless function as a symbol of the crossing into eternal life (the true Promised Land), as for instance it does at the conclusion of Bonaventure's *The Journey of the Mind to God*: "He who turns his full countenance toward this Mercy-Seat and with faith, hope, and love, devotion, admiration, joy, appreciation, praise and rejoicing, beholds Christ hanging on the Cross, such a one celebrates the Pasch, that is, the Passover, with Him. Thus, using the rod of the Cross, he may pass over the Red Sea, going from Egypt into the desert, where it is given to him to taste the *hidden manna*; he may rest with Christ in the tomb, as one dead to the outer world, but experiencing, nevertheless, as far as is possible in this present state as wayfarer, what was said on the Cross to the thief who was hanging there with Christ: *This day you shall be with me in Paradise*" (1993, VII.2, pp. 37-38).

raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God [...] For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:1, 3). Paul's insistence here that believers already have died with Christ and have been raised with Christ echoes comments that he makes in his letter to the Romans regarding baptism. There he asks rhetorically:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4).

Thus, in a real though incomplete sense, baptized believers share in the *newness of life* enjoyed by the risen Christ. More than simply journeying toward the Promised Land, we are by baptism already *in* the Promised Land, the glorious new creation that has been inaugurated where Christ is at the right hand of the Father. Since we have crossed into the true Promised Land through the waters of baptism, there is a typological connection between what baptism accomplishes and the entrance into the Promised Land accomplished by Joshua's crossing of the Jordan<sup>4</sup>.

In his study of the patristic development of this typological connection, Daniélou focuses on Origen, while also drawing upon Justin Martyr, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Gregory of Nyssa<sup>5</sup>. According to Origen in his *Commentary on John* –indebted here to Philo's etymology– the word "Jordan" can be translated "their descent" (1989, Book 6, p. 227). In John 1 it is the divine Word, who dwells "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1:18), who "descends" in the sense of becoming flesh. Likewise, the Spirit descends and abides in Jesus (Jn 1:32). Christ, the incarnate Word, does not only "descend" but also he is "lifted up" (Jn 3:14) on the Cross so that people may believe in him and thereby "have eternal life" (Jn 3:15).

For Origen, the Jordan's etymological meaning "their descent" refers to Jesus: he is the one who descended from God. The Jordan is a type of Jesus Christ. The streams that come forth from this river are the apostles and prophets, the foundation of the Church of which Christ is the cornerstone. Origen states, "we must understand the Jordan to be [the] Word of God which became flesh and dwelt among us" (1989, p. 228). Jesus' baptism in

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion, see Morales (2022).

<sup>5</sup> See also Nichols (2007, pp. 194-197).

the Jordan, then, shows us that by being baptized in water, we will be baptized into Jesus Christ, into the incarnate divine Word. Origen adds that at his baptism, Jesus receives the Spirit and thus is now “able to baptize those who come to him with that very Spirit which remained” (p. 228).

If Jesus typologically is the Jordan, how does this have anything to do with Joshua crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land? Origen is aware that the Hebrew name “Jesus” (Yeshua) is a variant of “Joshua” (Yehoshua). Thus, he has no trouble holding that “Jesus [Joshua], who succeeded Moses, was a type of Jesus the Christ who succeeded the dispensation through the Law with the gospel proclamation” (p. 231). On this view, Jesus Christ is the New Joshua because he succeeds Moses, by proclaiming the gospel. As John 1:17 observes: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”. Jesus Christ, the New Joshua, leads the people into the true Promised Land, to dwell with God everlastingly in “grace and truth”. To be baptized in the “Jordan” means to be baptized into Jesus Christ, the Word who descends so that we may ascend in the Spirit to eternal life with God. Jesus thereby leads the true crossing of the Jordan into the true Promised Land, through baptism.

But if Jesus is the New Joshua and baptism was typologically signified by Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan, why didn’t Paul say so? Origen does not doubt that the crossing of the Red Sea was also a type of baptism. After all, Christ was present in that crossing as well. Paul teaches that the fleeing Israelites were being protected by “the Supernatural Rock... and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). But the crossing of the Jordan led by Joshua was also a type of baptism. Origen thinks that Paul would have affirmed that the Israelites on the exodus “all passed through the Jordan, and all were baptized into Jesus in the Spirit and in the river” (p. 230).

Indeed, Origen considers it reasonable to suppose that the people underwent two baptisms –just like there was a baptism given by John the Baptist that contrasts with the sacrament of baptism. The Israelites were “baptized into Moses” (1 Cor 10:2) in the crossing of the Red Sea; but they still needed to be baptized into Christ. Origen describes baptism into Moses as deficient in a certain way: “their baptism has a bitter and briny element, for they still fear their enemies and cry out to the Lord” in complaint (p. 231). He depicts the Jordan as much greater than the Red Sea. The Red Sea is rather salty whereas the Jordan is a “truly sweet and fresh river” that is superior to the Red Sea just as Jesus is superior to Moses (p. 231).

In Joshua 3, when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant enter the river Jordan, the river stops flowing and –as happened at the Red Sea– the people

march across on dry ground. Joshua is thereby exalted, just as God had promised when he told Joshua, “Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land” (Jos 1:6). For Origen, as noted above, Joshua typologically signifies Jesus Christ. When Joshua is exalted in the crossing of the Jordan, this means that Jesus is exalted in the crossing. Once the people have crossed the Jordan, Joshua circumcises the whole nation of Israel and God proclaims: “This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” (Jos 5:9). They are now able to celebrate the Passover in a new way, freed entirely from Egypt and eating the food of the Promised Land. Origen sees all this as a description, typologically, of what Jesus Christ accomplishes. It is baptism into Jesus through crossing the Jordan that purifies the people. They now eat the life-giving Eucharist, a food better than the manna of the exodus, as “will be clear to the one who has perceived the true holy land and the Jerusalem above” (p. 232).

Origen connects this point with John 6, where Jesus presents himself as the “bread of life” and the “living bread” (Jn 6:48, 51) who is greater than the manna (p. 232). He is the “bread” that descends or “comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die” (Jn 6:50). It is only after the crossing of the Jordan that the Israelites stop eating the manna. Having crossed the Jordan, they eat the food of the Promised Land –which Origen associates with the spiritual perfection of moving from the Law to the grace of Jesus Christ.

Origen also draws upon the narrative of Elijah and Elisha, beginning in 2 Kings 2. When Elijah is about to be taken up to heaven, Elisha travels with Elijah to the banks of the river Jordan. There Elijah performs a miraculous crossing of the Jordan that typologically reenacts the crossing of Joshua and the Israelites into the Promised Land. The implication is that Elijah’s crossing of the Jordan signifies his crossing over into heavenly dwelling with God. After Elijah strikes the river Jordan, “the water was parted to the one side and to the other, till the two of them could go over on dry ground” (2 Kgs 2:8). Origen interprets this event as indicative of baptism: Elijah and Elisha were, in this way, baptized into Christ (the river Jordan). Here Origen repeats his interpretation of the river Jordan as “a type of the Word who condescended to our descent” (p. 234). Just as Moses struck the rock and life-giving water came out –“and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4; see Exod 17:6 and Num 20:11)– so also Elijah strikes the Jordan River, and it too was Christ. The striking of Christ is not a physical attack, Origen suggests, but rather is a seeking to penetrate or understand the Word of God unto salvation.

Elisha’s miraculous healing of Naaman the Syrian receives similar attention. When Naaman washes seven times in the Jordan, his leprosy clears up.

Naaman, however, at first mocks Elisha's command. Prior to obeying Elisha's command, Naaman angrily says: "I thought that he [Elisha] would surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" (2 Kgs 5:11-12). In Origen's interpretation, Naaman here has not realized the status of the river Jordan as a type of Christ. Just as non-Christians insult the saving power of Christ, so Naaman insults the power that Elisha ascribes to washing seven times in the Jordan. But just as Jesus heals lepers (see Mt 8:2-3), so also the Jordan can heal lepers. The Jordan typologically stands for baptism into Jesus. As Origen comments, the washing in the Jordan means washing "his soul with faith in Jesus" (p. 235). No wonder, Origen adds, the exiled Israelites "sat down and wept" when they found themselves "by the waters of Babylon" (Ps 137:1). Having sinned, they yearned for the Jordan, the "saving river" Jesus Christ (p. 235).

Origen realizes that these typologies can seem fanciful to people. He argues, however, that God himself arranged for typological links within Scripture, so that we might better understand the revealed mysteries of God. In his view, the typology of rivers can be seen in the prophetic books as well. When, in the book of Ezekiel, God describes the punishments that are going to come upon Egypt, it becomes clear that rivers have a typological significance. In Ezekiel 29, God tells Ezekiel to proclaim the word of the Lord against Egypt. Pharaoh lays claim to the Nile as though Pharaoh were its creator. Through Ezekiel, God compares Pharaoh to a sea dragon, and God promises Pharaoh: "I will cast you forth into the wilderness, you and all the fish of your streams" (Ezek 29:5). It is evident that this is imagery: the Nile is not the abode of a sea dragon. Typologically, however, the river Nile symbolizes the enemy of the river Jordan (Christ). Origen states: "just as the dragon is in the Egyptian river, so God is in the river which makes glad the city of God, for the Father is in the Son" (p. 236). The point is that rivers in Scripture can and do have typological significance, standing for realities that transcend the actual earthly reality of (for example) the Nile River.

In sum: Jesus, the New Joshua, has crossed the Jordan. We are to be baptized by sharing in the crossing of the New Joshua. Such baptism enables us to eat the heavenly life-giving food (the Eucharist, Christ himself) and to be taken up into God's embrace as was Elijah. The crossing of the Red Sea was a baptism into Moses, and it had as its goal the people's entrance into the Promised Land through the crossing of the Jordan, which the New Joshua (Jesus) has accomplished, so that now we are baptized into Christ.

When Origen takes up this same theme in his *Homilies on Joshua*, he proposes that the Israelites and the Egyptians at the Red Sea can be understood as types of two contrasting individuals: the righteous and the sinner. The sinner is easily caught up in the roiling waters of the Red Sea, symbolic of chaos and destruction. By contrast, for the righteous, the ark of God takes the lead, and the priests, following the ark, help to ensure that the people move safely and securely through the seas of this world.

Origen also refers to the typology of baptism as found in the crossing of the Jordan. Everyone who has received the sacrament of baptism has “parted the waters of the Jordan” and crossed to the Promised Land (Origen, 2002, Homily 4, p. 51). Equally, everyone who has received baptism has received a passage –if taken– through any life-threatening difficulty, whether of fire or of air. This requires, of course, “forsaking Egypt” (understood typologically as idolatry). It also requires learning the Law of God, which is the face of Moses that reveals the divine glory, in preparation for “the mystic font of baptism” (pp. 52-53). In baptism, the believer finds “the Jordan parted” and “enter[s] the land of promise,” the Church or the inaugurated kingdom, where “Jesus receives you after Moses, and becomes for you the leader of a new way” (p. 53).

Origen goes on to remark that just as Joshua was exalted in relation to the crossing of the Jordan, so Jesus was exalted at his baptism in the Jordan, which takes on its full meaning in light of “the exaltation of the cross” (p. 53). The New Joshua can and does lead us into the true Promised Land, and he is greatly exalted thereby. But we can turn away from him by sinning, cleaving to this world rather than cleaving, in purity of heart, to God and the world to come. Origen compares this situation to how the Jordan River divides into two parts: one flows on in sweetness, the other joins itself to the salty sea. The latter symbolizes the plight of sinners. They have abandoned the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Eph 4:5-6)<sup>6</sup>.

In the same place, Origen comments upon the typologically rich date on which Joshua led the people across the Jordan. The date was “the tenth day of the first month” (Jos 4:19), which is the date on which the lamb of sacrifice for Passover was supposed to be selected and inspected (Exod 12:3). God commanded Moses and Aaron to make the month on which the Passover took place to be the first month of the year, and on the fourteenth day of the

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Kilian McDonnell O.S.B. (1996) shows that it is Origen, rather than any earlier Father, “who introduces a substantial witness to the Pauline theology of Romans 6:4, a significant moment in the development of baptismal theology” (p. 201).



month the Passover lamb was to be killed and eaten in festal remembrance of the flight of the enslaved Israelites from Egypt (Exod 12:6). Jesus' death, too, takes place in relation to Passover; he is the fulfillment of the Paschal lamb, and his death is a sacrificial sin-offering (Pitre, 2015). On essentially the same date, Joshua crossed the Jordan and Jesus prepared to cross over in death. Thus Origen urges that we too should join ourselves to this saving "day" and "enter the land of promise" even now, living according to "the blessedness of perfection" in the spiritual life (2002, Homily 4, p. 57). Origen concludes by reiterating Christ's identity as the New Joshua leading his baptismal people into the true Promised Land.

In a second homily on this topic in his *Homilies on Joshua*, Origen repeats what we found in his *Commentary on John*: the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea was a baptism into Moses, while the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan was a baptism into Jesus (Homily 5, pp. 59-66). The sacrament of baptism, for Christians, consists in a crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land, an immersion into Jesus the New Joshua. In this crossing, we must hasten toward the Promised Land so as not to be waylaid by the pride and pomp of the world but rather to be configured to the humble and suffering Christ. We must hasten to obtain the virtues and to be strengthened by truth and sincerity.

Origen makes much of the fact that the crossing of the Jordan led directly into the conquest of Jericho. He interprets this event in terms not of literal warfare but of post-baptismal spiritual warfare against vices. The exaltation of Jesus the New Joshua (or of Joshua/Jesus) takes place not through military might but through the revelation of Jesus' divinity. Joshua 4:14 says that on the day in which the Israelites passed over the Jordan, "the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses". Origen takes this statement to refer to Jesus: prior to their baptism, they revered Moses, but now they worship Jesus. In a similar way, he interprets Joshua 5:2's reference to a second circumcision to be, in the spiritual sense, a reference to the dual circumcision of the heart by the Law and by the gospel. It is the gospel that takes away "the reproach of Egypt" (Jos 5:9) from the Israelites. The gospel's "circumcision" is baptism, as Origen goes on to say.

Throughout this discussion, "Joshua" is consistently "Jesus" for Origen. Thus, for those who cross the Jordan with Joshua/Jesus through baptism, the danger consists in falling back into sin. Origen mentions here Paul's manifold warnings to the Corinthian Christians. He places emphasis on Paul's description of the Christian as "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19) and of the Church as the "body" of Christ (Col 1:24). Even after crossing the Jor-

dan, it remains possible to return to the “reproach of Egypt”. Consistently, baptism, the crossing of the Jordan, and Christ as the New Joshua who leads us through the waters of the Jordan (empowered by his Cross and Resurrection) to the Promised Land are intertwined in Origen’s exegesis.

According to Daniélou (1960), in linking the crossing of the Jordan with the sacrament of baptism –and in relegating the crossing of the Red Sea to a “baptism into Moses”– Origen knew that he was innovating. Daniélou notes, however, that Origen was not innovating in applying the already “traditional idea that Joshua is a type of Christ” (p. 263). Justin Martyr (1995) connects Moses with the Law and Joshua with the gospel. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr argues that “[t]he people found seventy willows and twelve springs after crossing the Jordan” (194-270, p. 242) and that this is a symbolic suggestion that crossing the Jordan (baptism) has led them into the fullness of life.

It could be, then, that Origen is drawing upon Justin Martyr. Certainly, in his reflections on the river Jordan and Naaman the Syrian, Origen is indebted to “a traditional theme of early baptismal catechetical courses” (Daniélou, 1996, pp. 266-267)<sup>7</sup>. For my purposes here, however, the key is the typological link that Origen makes between Joshua and Jesus the New Joshua, so that the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land typologically signifies the sacrament of baptism and the sanctification that baptism accomplishes. The Jordan itself, furthermore, is a type of Christ (the Word’s descent), and so “the baptismal waters represent Christ himself in whom the baptized is washed” (p. 268). This connects Christ’s baptism in the Jordan with our baptism into Christ in multiple ways. As Daniélou remarks:

Joshua crossing the Jordan, with the dove of the Spirit resting on him, is a type of the humanity of Jesus assumed by the Word and dwelt in by the Holy Spirit: the theme of Joshua and that of Baptism harmonize to form a great theological symbol. (p. 269)

After Origen, Daniélou observes, the crossing of the Red Sea remains a prominent type of baptism (rather than merely of “baptism into Moses”). Nevertheless, some of Origen’s suggestions regarding baptism and the New Joshua are taken up. For example, in his *Catechetical Lectures*, Cyril of Jeru-

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<sup>7</sup> He names Tertullian, Didymus of Alexandria, and Ambrose.

salem refers to Elijah having “crossed the Jordan” as a preparation for being taken up into heaven (1995, III.5, p. 15). Cyril also depicts a sea dragon in the Jordan (drawing upon Job 40:23) that Christ, in his baptism, conquers –perhaps similar to the dragon in the Nile depicted typologically in Ezekiel, and to which Origen refers (III.11, p. 17). Somewhat more to the point, Cyril argues that Moses gave his successor the name “Jesus” (“Joshua”), since Jesus the New Joshua was to become Israel’s King. Cyril adds:

And Jesus [Joshua] the son of Nave was in many things a type of Him [Christ]. For when he [Joshua] began to rule over the people, he began from Jordan, whence Christ also, after He was baptized, began to preach the gospel. (X.11, p. 60)

Christ’s baptism at the Jordan is here linked with Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan, and it establishes Christ as the New Joshua and thus the rightful ruler of his people (and, as the *New Joshua*, not only of the twelve tribes but of the whole world, to which the risen Christ sends the eleven remaining disciples in Matthew 28:19).

Similarly, according to Gregory of Nyssa (1995), it is manifest that the Old Testament “everywhere prefigured the likeness of our regeneration”, including the sacrament of baptism (p. 521). He gives various examples of salvific water, including the crossing of the Red Sea, which signifies a flight from sin and a purification unto salvation. Much like Origen, he moves from the Red Sea to Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan. He observes that the people of Israel “did not enter the land of promise until it had first been brought, with Joshua for its guide and the pilot of its life, to the passage of the Jordan” (p. 522). Crossing over the Jordan entails entering into the Promised Land, which Gregory associates with entering into the new covenant in Christ through baptism.

Gregory thinks that by commanding the Israelites to collect twelve stones from the river Jordan during the crossing (Joshua 4:3), Joshua is anticipating Christ’s establishment of the Church upon the twelve disciples. To cross over the Jordan thus symbolizes our baptismal entrance into the Church, the true Promised Land. Gregory also gives special significance to the Jordan in connection with Elisha’s miracle of cleansing Naaman the Syrian. For Gregory, the mode by which Naaman is healed signifies the power of baptism, and the river Jordan stands as the fount of all baptismal water. He states, “For Jordan alone of rivers, receiving in itself the first-fruits of sanctification and benediction, conveyed in its channel to the whole world, as it were from some fount

in the type afforded by itself, the grace of Baptism" (p. 522). The Jordan has a major place in the history of salvation. Not only do Joshua and the Israelites cross it, but also Elijah crosses it and John the Baptist, fulfilling the role of Elijah, dwells near it. Most notably, John the Baptist baptizes Jesus in the Jordan. Gregory concludes: "For as great Lebanon presents a sufficient cause of wonder in the very trees which it brings forth and nourishes, so is the Jordan glorified by regenerating men and planting them in the Paradise of God" (p. 523).

Thus for Gregory, as for Origen, the sacrament of baptism is grounded in the Jordan and in the baptism of Jesus. Baptism enables us to cross over to the Promised Land, the "Paradise of God". We do this by becoming true disciples of Christ in his Church and thereby becoming the bride of Christ, rejoicing in the eschatological marriage of God and creation.

### Thomas Aquinas's Contributions

In the seventh volume of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1989) remarks with respect to Jesus' baptism: "The profound immersion at the Baptism into salvation history, which was itself actually moving towards this point, is, with the narrative of the childhood of Jesus, an allusive recapitulation of the chief stages of this salvation history" (pp. 69-70). He argues that the temptation in the wilderness that comes after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan is similar to Israel's existential stance. On the exodus, Israel stands alone in the presence of God, in a condition of temptation and in constant need of grace. In this context, Balthasar deems Jesus to be both "the new Moses" and "the new Israel," but he does not mention Joshua (p. 68). He connects Jesus' "fulfil[ling] all righteousness" (Mt 3:15) at Jesus' baptism, with God's will "to lead Jesus, as the author of the salvation of all God's sons, to perfection through the Passion (Heb 2.10)" (pp. 315-316). He sees the connection of Jesus' baptism to his Passion, but he does not perceive the connection to the crossing over to the Promised Land.

By comparison, when Aquinas turns to Jesus' baptism in IIIa., q. 39, he notes that, if Jesus intended to connect his own baptism with the sacrament of baptism, then it might seem that Jesus should have traveled to the Red Sea to be baptized –because Paul specially links the crossing of the Red Sea to the sacrament of baptism. Aquinas, however, thinks that the crossing of the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua signifies baptism more fully. He explains that Jesus chose to be baptized in the River Jordan because of Joshua's crossing over the Jordan into the Promised Land. As Aquinas comments:

The crossing of the Red Sea foreshadowed baptism in this –that baptism takes away sin: whereas the crossing of the Jordan foreshadows it in this– that it opens the gate to the heavenly kingdom: and this is the principal effect of baptism, and accomplished through Christ alone. (IIIa, q. 39 a. 4 ad 1)

This is a New Joshua Christology.

According to Aquinas, Christ instituted the sacrament of baptism at his baptism by John at the Jordan. Emphasizing how fitting this location is, he again observes:

It was through the river Jordan that the children of Israel entered into the land of promise. Now, this is the prerogative of Christ’s baptism over all other baptisms: that it is the entrance to the kingdom of God, which is signified by the land of promise. (IIIa, q. 39 a. 4)

By being baptized in the Jordan, Christ revealed and instituted the sacrament of baptism as a crossing over into the true Promised Land. Aquinas explains that the sacrament of baptism accomplishes this crossing over by the divine power of the Trinity, by our faith in the Trinity and in Christ, and by the removal of the debt of original sin that impeded communion with God.

For the baptized, access to the divine (*heavenly*) life is immediately granted; the baptized stand with the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ, sharing in the love and joy of Christ’s kingdom. But at the same time the full consummation of the crossing over into the kingdom awaits the consummation that brought by Christ’s coming in glory. For now, the baptized person “needs to pray continually, in order to enter heaven: for though sins are remitted through baptism, there still remain the fomes of sin assailing us from within, and the world and the devils assailing us from without” (IIIa, q. 39 a. 5). Aquinas thinks this latter point is why the evangelist Luke mentions that, just prior to the theophany and just after his baptism, Jesus “was praying” (Lk 3:21).

In his discussion of Christ’s baptism, Aquinas remarks that “Christ, when He had sanctified baptism [by sanctifying the waters of the Jordan], saw that heaven was opened to men” (IIIa, q. 39 a. 5 ad 2). Access to the eschatological kingdom of God had arrived. But if “Christ’s Passion is... the cause of our reconciliation to God” (IIIa, q. 49 a. 4), then how can Christ’s baptism already mark the inauguration of the kingdom of God? Notably, Aquinas holds that only when the redemptive “cost of Christ’s blood” had

been paid out of love did anyone “enter the kingdom of heaven by obtaining everlasting beatitude” (IIIa, q. 49 a. 5 ad 1). Aquinas holds that the sacrament of baptism was indeed instituted at the moment of Christ’s baptism, and this sacrament opens up the kingdom of God. But he observes that the sacrament derives its spiritual power or efficacy from the Cross of Christ, not from his baptism *per se* (see IIIa, q. 49 a. 5 ad 3).

In addition, he notes that Christ’s Ascension to the right hand of the Father plays a role in opening up the kingdom of God to believers. When Christ in his glorified humanity ascended to the Father, the bodily entrance of humans into the kingdom began (IIIa, q. 49 a. 5 ad 4). Now that Christ is there, we have the hope of joining him fully there, through the charity given us by the Holy Spirit. In this regard Aquinas cites Micah 2:13, “He who opens the breach will go up before them; they will break through and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king will pass on before them, the Lord at their head” (cited in IIIa, q. 57 a. 1 ad 3).

In responding to the question of whether Christ opened the gates of heaven (the kingdom of God) by his Passion, Aquinas cites a passage from Hebrews: “We have confidence to enter the sanctuary [the eschatological Temple, the kingdom of God] by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh” (Heb 10:19-20, cited in IIIa, q. 49 a. 5 *sed contra*). Christ opens this way for us by his death on the Cross. But we are incorporated into his saving death through baptism, as Romans 6:3 says: “all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death”. Aquinas cites the latter passage in a reply to an objection where he is discussing the heavens being opened at Christ’s baptism in the Jordan (IIIa, q. 39 a. 5 ad 3). Christ’s institution of the sacrament of baptism at the Jordan is the institution of saving sacrament whose power depends upon Christ’s Cross. Because of this connection of baptism to the Cross, the heavens open when Christ receives baptism. Aquinas explains that the occurrences that characterize Christ’s baptism – prefigured by Moses’ crossing of the Red Sea and Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan – are figures of what the sacrament accomplishes in us (IIIa, q. 39 a. 8).

Discussing Christ’s miracles, Aquinas argues that it would not have been fitting for Christ, like Moses, Joshua, and Elijah, to perform a miracle of dividing the waters, because Christ came not to divide but “to restore all things to a state of peace and calm” (IIIa, q. 44 a. 4 ad 3). In his *Commentary on Hebrews*, Aquinas does not draw an explicit connection between Joshua’s miraculous crossing of the Jordan and Christ’s crossing into the true Promised Land, but

he does observe that Hebrews 4:8, in accord with Psalm 95, intends to show that the “rest” sought by Israel was not the “rest” for which we must seek. The rest sought by the Israelites under Joshua was temporal and earthly; whereas the rest sought by Christians –and delivered by Jesus Christ– is “a spiritual rest,” of which the rest sought by Israel in the Promised Land was “a sign” (Thomas Aquinas, 2012, p. 96).

In his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Aquinas explains Jesus’ name by remarking that “there have been others who were also called Jesus, like Jesus the son of Nave [Joshua the son of Nun]” –and he then observes that this Joshua prefigured Jesus Christ (2013, p. 6). He states, “Jesus [Joshua] led the people of Israel into the land of the promise; but this Jesus, i.e., our Savior, led us not into a fleshly land, but into a heavenly land. *For we have him as the author and finisher in his blood* (Heb 12:2)” (p. 7). Aquinas again shows the eschatological value of New Joshua Christology.

Commenting on Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism by John (Mt 3:13-17), Aquinas picks up on Origen’s etymology of “Jordan” as meaning “descent” (p. 94). Given this etymology, Aquinas deems that the River Jordan is a symbol of humility. Not only does Jesus embody humility, but also humility is required for the baptized to be able to receive the grace given by the sacrament. The etymological meaning of “descent,” and the connection of this meaning to humility, are attributed by Aquinas in his *Catena Aurea* to a ninth-century monk of Auxerre, Remigius (1995, p. 108). Aquinas adds that “Scripture tells of many wonders wrought at various times in this river”; for instance, “as Elijah divided the waters of old, so Christ the Lord wrought in the same Jordan the separation of sin” (p. 108). He also remarks that according to (Pseudo-)Chrysostom, the opening of the heavens (Mt 3:16) signifies the opening of the gate of heaven or the opening of the heavenly kingdom of God, accomplished by the sacrament of baptism.

Again in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Aquinas observes that the baptized –having been united to Christ (Galatians 3:27)– “gain a heavenly inheritance” as noted in 1 Peter 1:3-4, so that it is no longer the case that “heaven [is] closed to the human race by sin” (2013, p. 96)<sup>8</sup>. When he turns to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-11, he mentions the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land. He notes that the Israelites

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<sup>8</sup> Notably, in his commentary, Aquinas holds that the vision that Jesus saw of the Spirit descending in the form of a dove was seen by the bystanders as well, rather than solely by Jesus.

on the exodus pointed forward to the sacrament of baptism when, “after the crossing of the Red Sea, which was a figure of baptism, [they] came into the land of promise through the desert and the wilderness” (pp. 100-101). Although he mentions the entrance into the Promised Land, he mentions only the crossing of the Red Sea under Moses and not the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua that he had mentioned earlier.

In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, he not only attributes the etymology of “Jordan” (“their descent”) to Origen –again demonstrating his knowledge of Origen’s Joshua-rich commentary– but also observes that the River Jordan has importance for understanding the sacrament of baptism because “it is the border line between those who received their inheritance from Moses on one side of the Jordan, and those who received it from Joshua on the other side” (Thomas Aquinas, 2010, p. 102). The former are Jews (inheritors of Moses), the latter are Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles (inheritors of Joshua). The connection between Joshua and Jesus the New Joshua is crystal clear here. Those who receive baptism enter the true Promised Land under the New Joshua. As Aquinas says, “For just as the Jews had to cross the Jordan to enter the promised land, so one must pass through baptism to enter into the heavenly land” (p. 102). The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan shows that the crossing led by Joshua signifies the baptismal Jordan-crossing of Jesus, by which he institutes the sacrament of baptism and leads his people into the eschatological kingdom of God.

Could Aquinas have said even more, given his appreciation for New Joshua Christology? I wonder if Jesus’ role as the New Joshua, leading his people into the true Promised Land, could be integrated into what Aquinas says about Christ as Head of the Church in III, question 8. In my view, Jesus’ role as the New Joshua merits a separate article in question 39 on Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, or at least articles 1 and 3 could be strengthened by this theme. Aquinas’s reflections on Jesus’ death in question 50 might benefit from reflection on the parallel between crossing the Jordan and crossing into the true Promised Land, perhaps especially in article 6 on how Christ’s death (his being dead) conduced to our salvation. In addition, Aquinas’s question on Christ’s Ascension (question 57) might be strengthened by consideration of the eschatological New Joshua and the new exodus.

Ontologically, the “New Joshua” has specially to do with the resurrected body and the glorified subject (individual and communal) in eternal life, because the eschatological New Joshua leads us into the true Promised Land where we will dwell forever (and perfectly) with God. Christ is the eschatological New Joshua because he has the power to lead all human beings to



eternal life. Aquinas states that Christ, “by coming sacramentally into man, causes the life of grace, according to John 1:17” (IIIa, q. 79 a. 1). This life of grace is the new exodus, although Aquinas does not describe it as such. Christ crosses over the “Jordan” of death by his Passion, and the sacraments unite us to the power of his Passion.

Not only baptism but also the Eucharist has an important role to play here. Aquinas remarks that the Eucharist inaugurates our eternal life, insofar as it “cause[s] the attaining of eternal life” and is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet or “the refreshment of spiritual food” that will characterize eternal life (IIIa, q. 79 a. 2). Our journey to eternal life receives great assistance from the Eucharist. Aquinas describes the Eucharist as “spiritual food and spiritual medicine” that strengthens our spiritual life, which is precisely what the new exodus journey requires (IIIa, q. 79 a. 6).

Asking when the fullness of the Promised Land will be reached by Christ’s members, Aquinas observes that Christ deliberately did not reveal when the end will come, and so no calculation or supposition can ascertain the time (Suppl., q. 77 a. 3). When it does happen, it will be done suddenly and all at once. In Aquinas’s view, all will be dead, all will be burned to ashes in an eschatological fiery purification of the cosmos, and all shall rise. Our risen bodies will be translucent to our charity, and we will see the divine essence. In eternal life, when we see bodies, we “will see so great a glory of God in bodies, especially in the glorified bodies and most of all in the body of Christ” (Suppl., q. 92 a. 2). Our degree of blessedness will depend upon our degree of charity, and the whole Church will be God’s bride, brought into “Christ’s dwelling” and rejoicing in his spiritual gifts (Suppl., q. 95 a. 1 *sed contra*).

Thus, Aquinas has much to offer to our reflection on the ontological realities that are the new exodus and the true Promised Land. As we have seen, he knows of Christ the eschatological New Joshua. Contemporary Thomistic Christology would be wise to make even more explicit these themes, especially with respect to life in Christ, the sacraments, and eternal life.

### Conclusion

Aquinas and Church Fathers such as Origen are in agreement about the central points regarding Christ the New Joshua. As we have seen, Origen and Aquinas focus attention especially on Christ’s baptism in the Jordan. They hold that Joshua’s crossing of the Jordan foreshadows the sacrament of baptism (instituted by Christ at his baptism in the Jordan) by opening up the kingdom of

God. Christ the New Joshua has led the way across the waters of death and to the kingdom of the Father, where God's people dwell with God. Aquinas states that Christ chose to be baptized in the Jordan because "it was through the river Jordan that the children of Israel entered into the land of promise," and Christ's baptism institutes the sacrament of baptism by which believers cross over into the true Promised Land, the kingdom of God (IIIa, q. 39 a. 4). The ascended Christ has completed the new exodus and enables us to join him.

In his biblical commentaries, as described above, Aquinas is explicit in presenting Christ as the New Joshua who has accomplished the entrance into the true Promised Land, in fulfillment of the exodus. In his *Commentary on Hebrews*, Aquinas notes that the "rest" (Heb 4:8) that Christ provides is "a spiritual rest," symbolized by the rest that Israel sought in crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land (2012, p. 96). In his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Aquinas remarks that Joshua (or "Jesus the son of Nave") prefigures Jesus Christ (2013, p. 6). Aquinas states, "Jesus [i.e. Joshua] led the people of Israel into the land of the promise; but this Jesus, i.e., our Savior, led us not into a fleshly land, but into a heavenly land" (p. 7). In his *Commentary on John*, Aquinas connects this new exodus with Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, insofar as Jesus there instituted the sacrament of baptism. Thus, not only the entrance into the Promised Land, but also the Jordan River unites Joshua and Jesus (2010, p. 102).

New Joshua Christology, therefore, is richly present in Aquinas's writings, both in the *tertia pars* and in his biblical commentaries. Christ's baptism helps us to understand our baptism, our place in the crossing into the true Promised Land that has been accomplished by the New Joshua. It is worth noting that New Joshua Christology continues today to be of importance in the interpretation of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. Thus, according to the interpretation offered by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan begins his public life and signals his "acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's suffering Servant" (n. 536). The *Catechism* takes up the theme of the New Joshua in discussing the sacrament of baptism, when it describes the Easter Vigil's rite for the Blessing of the Water. Among the liturgical figures of baptism are the Spirit's "moving over the face of the waters" at the dawn of creation (Gen 1:2), Noah's ark, and the crossing of the Red Sea; and the *Catechism* adds the "the crossing of the Jordan River by which the People of God received the gift of the land promised to Abraham's descendants" (n. 1222). The Promised Land that Joshua entered was, as the *Catechism* says, "an image of eternal life" (n. 1222). Thus Christ the New Joshua leads us into the eschatological inheritance of the people of God.

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