

Andrei Rublev's Old Testament Trinity Icon in Cultural Context

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Andrei Rublev's "Old Testament Trinity" icon was recognized as a masterpiece when it came to light in the early twentieth century and it also enjoyed unparalleled prestige in its own time.¹ Painted in the early 15th century, it gives a new interpretation to an established iconographic composition —the "Hospitality of Abraham" according to Genesis 18 [hereafter referred to as HA] (figure 1).² This Old Testament theme was traditionally used to symbolize a New Testament truth – the revealed God in Trinity. Rublev made subtle changes to this composition which allowed it to fathom this revelation. His innovations so successfully plumbed an ancient mystery that in the 16th century Ivan IV's Hundred Chapter's Council put forth Rublev's composition as a model for the "Old Testament Trinity" theme [hereafter referred to as OTT].

Iconographers based HA on biblical narrative and portrayed Abraham at the oak of Mamre offering a meal to three travelers whom he recognizes as Lord. The Christian exegesis of this

¹ See L. Hughes, "Inventing Andrei: Soviet and Post-Soviet Views of Andrei Rublev and His Trinity Icon," *Slavonica*, vol. 9, no.2 (November, 2003), 83-90.

² V.I. Antoneva and N.E. Mneva, *Katalog drevnerusskoi zhivopisi*, t. 1, XI-nachala XVI veka, (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1963) [Katalog], # 192, entry 230, pp. 285-290. G. Bunge, *L'Iconographie de la Sainte Trinité des Catacombes à Andrei Roublev*, (Paris: Mediaspaul, 2000) offers a comprehensive attempt to place the icon within a tradition interpreting the "Hospitality of Abraham." See also A. A. Saltykov, "Ikonoграфия 'Troitsy' Andreia Rubleva," in O. I. Podobedova, *Drevnerusskoe Iskusstvo XIV-XV vv.*, Iskusstvo, (1984), 77-85; G.I. Vzdornov, *Troitsa Andreia Rubleva: Antologiya*, (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1981), [Antologiya], figures 1-60 and M. Golubtsov, "Ikona zhivonachal'noi Troitsy," *Zhurnal Moskovskoi patriarkhii*, No. 7, 1972, 69-76.

event built from Abraham's understanding that the three visitors were one God.³ Exegetes, including iconographers, interpreted Abraham's insight as prophetic of the New Testament revelation that God is one in three. Iconographers represented the visitors as angels, divine messengers, and symbolized the angels' inner oneness in a variety of ways. Most commonly they made the angels similar in appearance and purpose.

The meal Abraham offers prefigures the Eucharist, the Church's principal sacrament for realizing the presence of the Godhead in the world.⁴ Typically the angels sit around an altar-like table on which are cakes that Sara made and a chalice with the head of the calf which Abraham sacrificed. The cakes allude to the Eucharistic wafers. The chalice prefigures the sacrifice of atonement that Christ made of Himself so that God would make Himself known through the Eucharist. Although no one representation of HA is alike, the version that Rublev created broke new ground. In an unprecedented way, it penetrates the ontological mystery of divine self-manifestation and earned the appellation, OTT. With perfect economy of means, he raised every aspect of the icon to a symbolic level and left the historical context in Genesis 18 in the background of meaning. This study addresses the motivations for and meaning of his poetic innovations.

Scholarship on the icon in both Russia and the West has been extensive and informative. However, no one has given a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between the icon's poetic organization, its meaning and the author's creative strategy.⁵ Both

³ See the inscription on the 5th century St. Maria Majore mosaic of HA in Bunge, *L'Iconographie*, 20.

⁴ The three angels at the meal allude to the Eucharist's role of giving knowledge of the Trinity. St. Germanus' authoritative interpretation of the divine liturgy emphasized that the priest stood before the "altar of the throne of God" Whom he sees with "uncovered face" and "is learned in divine knowledge of the Holy Trinity." Like Abraham and the viewer of the icon, the priest "contemplates the heavenly liturgy, [he] is initiated even into the splendor of the life-giving Trinity." Like the faithful in prayer before the icon, he bows down as he performs the divine mystery because "he converses invisibly with the only God." See St. Germanus of Constantinople, *On the Divine Liturgy*, (Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 91, 99.

⁵ See the bibliographies in *Katalog*, 288-290, *Antologija*, 127-130 and V.A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, Moskva, "Moskoarkhiv," 2001. G. Bunge's study, *L'Iconographie de la Sainte Trinité*, goes farther than most in presenting a unified vision of the formal and ideological aspects of the icon. He interprets it as an expression of a mystical, Pentecostal understanding of the Holy Spirit, based in the Gospel of St. John and in the liturgy and reflecting St. Sergius' spirituality ac-

Rublev's theme and medieval Byzantino-Russian esthetics require that his icon be approached as an integral wholeness in which all aspects are functionally interrelated.⁶ Also it is legitimate to assume that Rublev created a unique poetic structure from a repertory of symbols which have special relevance to the spiritual culture of his time and to his specific intentions. An examination of the icon from these points of view offer a valid approach to how Rublev invested HA with a new depth of meaning.

All are agreed that Rublev's projection of the three angels onto an implicit circle was a key innovation. Another was the way he portrayed the chalice. Rublev highlighted it first, by not showing other eating implements on the table and second, by placing it in the foreground, alone and at the center of the circle. I will show that these two innovations—the presence of a hidden circle and the unique representation of the chalice—work together to endow the composition with a symbolic meaning which is key to the icon's total organization and to Rublev's creative process.

Although scholarship has noted the importance of the circle, it has not related the circle to the symbolism of the chalice. Nor has it elucidated the central significance of these paired symbols to the icon as a whole on both the poetic and semantic levels. I will demonstrate that these symbols enabled Rublev to interpret HA through the lens of hesychast spiritual culture and I will describe the theological and spiritual agenda which might have motivated Rublev to choose them. This agenda, I will argue, made the writings of Dionysios the Areopagite central to hesychast written and iconographic culture. I will show the Areopagite's influence on two related compositions, HA and a composition interpreting Proverbs 9:1-5, which I shall call "Wisdom builds her house and offers her feast [WBH]."⁷ Both a variant of WBH and Rublev's

cording to his *Life* by Pakhomii Logofet. His reading uncovers one possible level of meaning. Yet, because he downplays the influence of hesychasm, (on the assumption that Rublev was illiterate) he misses another related deeper dimension.

⁶ On the Beautiful as the object of divine contemplation and its association with the inner connectedness of an integral hierarchy of Being, see Dionysios the Areopagite, "On the Divine Names," 4:10 in *Pseudo-Dionysios: The Complete Works*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). See also G. Mathew, *Byzantine Aesthetics*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 158-160.

⁷ On this composition and the exegetical tradition informing it, see J. Meyendorff, "Wisdom-

OTT made use of the paired symbols of the circle and the chalice in the Areopagite's ontological definition. I will analyze the impact of these two symbols on Rublev's icon and their role in making it a functionally interrelated whole with a unified point of view and meaning.

Scholars are unanimous in acknowledging the influence of hesychast spirituality on Rublev's icon, although they differ as to the matter of degree.⁸ The symbolism of the circle and the chalice assumed their importance for Andrei Rublev's OTT and for certain versions of WBH because these compositions had a common message to convey. During this time, leading Western-influenced Orthodox churchmen challenged Orthodoxy's central belief in our ability to participate in the transcendent, uncreated nature of God. The ancient tradition of hesychast mysticism became the dominant spiritual trend in answer to this challenge.⁹ Hesychast theologians, such as Gregory Palamas and others, took on the task of defining how the hidden divine person of God the Father, the source and life of all, realizes His transcendence by "exceeding" Himself through the action of Son and Spirit: This action revealed the divine nature in common to the three Trinitarian persons "outside" the Father's hiddenness by "energies," also called wisdom or providence.¹⁰

Iconographers sought ways to emphasize the Trinitarian communication of the Father's transcendence and our ability to receive this communication and know God.¹¹ The works of Dionysios the

Sophia: Contrasting Approaches to a Complex Theme," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 41 (1987), 391-401 and "L'iconographie de la Sagesse Divine," *Cahiers archéologiques*, vol. 10, (1959), 259-268. The Patriarch Filofei (Philothéus) gives a hesychast interpretation of WBH. See his commentary on Proverbs 9 in Episkop Arsenii, *Filofeia patriarkha Konstantinopl'skago XIV veka, Tri rechi k Episkopu Ignatiiu s ob'iasneniem izrecheniia pritchei 'Premudorst' sozda sebe dom i proch.'* [*Tri rechi*], (Novgorod: Parovaia tipografia, 1898). V. A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 324 notes the connection between WBH and OTT from an ideological standpoint but without poetic analysis.

⁸ See for example A.I. Klibanov, 'K kharakteristike mirovozzreniia Andreia Rubleva,' in M.V. Alpatov, *Andrei Rublev i ego epokha*, (Moskva: "Iskusstvo," 1971), 62-103; Vasiliev, A., "Andrei Rublev i Grigorii Palama," *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, vol.10, (1960), 33-34. Even P. Bushkevitch, who questions the broad impact of hesychast spirituality in Russia accedes its impact on the icon. See "The Limits of Hesychasm: Some notes on monastic spirituality in Russia 1350-1500" in *Forsch. zur Osteurop. Gesch.* 38 (1986), 97-109.

⁹ On hesychasm see J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, (London: The Faith Press, 1964).

¹⁰ See for instance *Tri rechi*, 108.

¹¹ The patristic interpretations of Proverbs 9:1-5, known in Rus' from the 11th c., described the (Eucharistic) feast as a revelation of the "mind of the Trinity." See V.G. Briusova, "Tolkovanie

Areopagite gave them a language to speak of the divine transcendence, and its communication as providence, wisdom or energies.¹² In the 14th century, the widespread portrayal of Christ as Angel of Great Counsel in both WBH and HA may have reflected the influence of the Areopagite, according to the church historian, Father John Meyendorff.¹³ The Areopagite's remark that Christ was acting as Angel of Great Counsel when He reveals the Father provided iconographers a way to symbolize the communication of the Father's transcendence.

We see Wisdom portrayed as this Angel in the WBH fresco composition in the Serbian monastery of Grachanitsa of the early 14th century (figure 2).¹⁴ He officiates behind an altar table, offering Wisdom's "feast" of knowledge of the hidden Father through communion in His Eucharistic mystical body (the sanctified bread and wine). A servant of Wisdom is on either side to make a symmetrical arrangement of three. Behind the Angel loom the seven columns of Wisdom's house according to Proverbs 9. Traditional exegesis interpreted these columns as the seven spirits of Wisdom indwelling in the Church. For hesychasts these seven spirits referred to the multiple energies of the Trinity revealing the Oneness associated with the Father's transcendence.¹⁵

The representation of one of Abraham's three visitors in HA as the Angel of Great Counsel became especially widespread in

na IX pritchu Solomonova v Izbornike 1073, g., "prilozhenie," in *Izbornik Sviatoslava 1073 g.* (Moskva: "Nauka," 197), 306. In a 14th century composition in Zarma, Georgia, Wisdom appears as a man with three faces. See L.M. Evseeva, "Dve simvolicheskie kompozitsii i rospisi XIV veka monastyrja Zarma," *Vizantiiskii vremennik*, 43 (1982), 134-40.

¹² G.M. Prokhorov, *Pamiatniki perevodnoi i russkoi literatury XIV-XV vekov*, Leningrad, "Nauka," 1957, 24-27 notes the influence of Dionysios the Areopagite in the symbolism of WBH and in the 14th and 15th centuries generally.

¹³ See J. Meyendorff, "L'Iconographie de la Sagesse Divine," *Cahiers archéologiques*, vol. 10, 1959, 268-270. Father Meyendorff quoted the Areopagite's remark in "On the Celestial Hierarchy," 4:4: "he [Jesus] himself entered the order of revealers and is called the 'angel of great counsel.' Indeed, when he announced what he knew of the Father, was it not as an angel?" For the Areopagite's remark, see also *Pseudo-Dionysios: The Complete Works*, 159. The Areopagite's reference is to John 15:15: "...for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you." Here the words "made known" in Greek are in a word play with the word "angel" according to note 64, p.159.

¹⁴ See "L'Iconographie de la Sagesse Divine," fig. 8.

¹⁵ See J. Meyendorff, "L'Iconographie de la Sagesse Divine," 260, 270. For the hesychast interpretation, see *Tri rechi*, 47.





Fig. 1. "Old Testament Trinity" by Andrei Rublev.
From *Troitsa Andreia Rubleva: Antologiya*. Moscow:
Iskusstvo, 1981.

ПРЕДЛОЖЕНЫЕ ВЪ ХРАМѢ



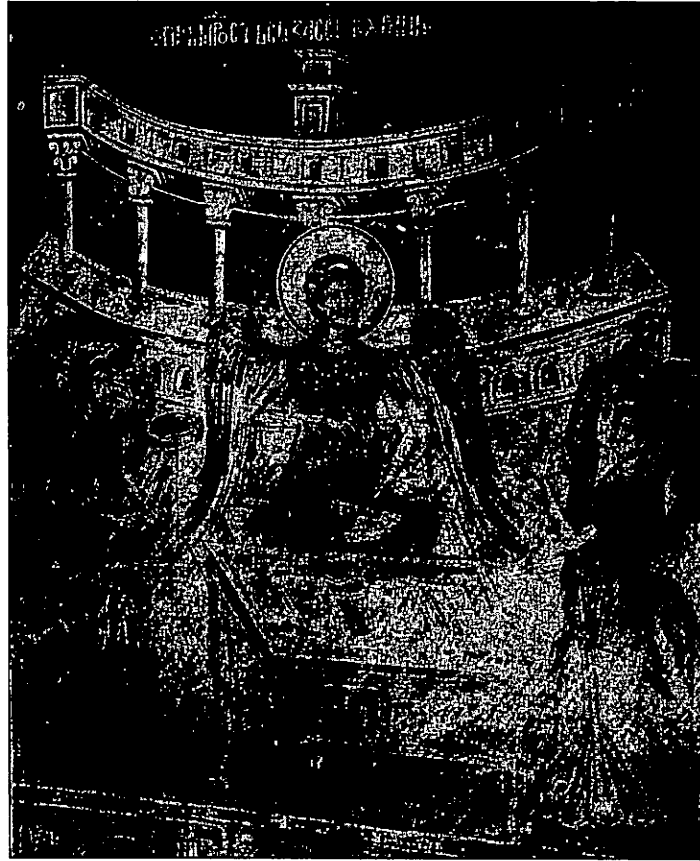


Fig. 2. Early 14th century fresco composition in the Serbian monastery of Grachanitsa. From *Zbornik u cast Bogdana Popovica*. Belgrade, 1929.





Fig. 3. "Old Testament Trinity" by Feofan Grek.
From *Troitsa Andreia Rubleva: Antologiya*. Moscow:
Isskustvo, 1981.





Fig.4. Early 15th century Novgorod icon from the church of St. George. From *Troitsa Andreia Rubleva: Antologiya*. Moscow: Isskusstvo, 1981.

the 14th century.¹⁶ This composition built on the tendency, evident from earliest times, of singling out the central angel as Christ-Wisdom.¹⁷ The other two angels reflected the central angel's meaning, and were messengers of the Messenger. Typically, the central angel alone would wear a cruciform halo; the inscription Trinity would be over his head; the oak of Mamre would appear behind him, taking on associations with the cross and the resurrection. He was sometimes larger, and in one common variant looked straight ahead at the viewer while the other two smaller angels regarded each other.

The dynamic portrayal of the Angel of Great Counsel in both HA and WBH reflected the desire to emphasize the Areopagite's idea that the Father's power was being revealed. Two Novgorod renditions marked this power and fullness by portraying the Angel "en large" and by endowing Him with outstretched over-sized wings, —a late 14th century Novgorod fresco by Feofan Grek (fig. 3) and an early 15th century Novgorod icon from the church of St. George (fig. 4).¹⁸ The Angel in the Grachanitsa fresco is similar in appearance and in context (fig. 2). These analogies between HA and WBH suggest a shared meaning and function and a shared hesychast agenda about the manifest nature of divine transcendence. A 14th century icon

¹⁶ See *Antologiya*, fig.s 9, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22, 23, 25, 31, 32, 33.

¹⁷ Iconographers thereby implied that the angels' appearance to Abraham foreshadowed the way that God made himself known in the New Testament, i.e., through Christ at the incarnation and the Eucharist, acting as the Logos-Spirit. C. Kucharek, *The Byzantine-Slav Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, (Ontario, Canada: Alleluia Press, 1971), 616-17 points out that in the early Christian era, the Greek "logos" and "pneuma" both appear with the meaning "spirit." They referred to a "spirit-Word" or "Spirit-presence-of God." The incarnation was thought to come about by the operation of this Logos-Spirit. This was reflected in early forms of the Epiclesis in which the "Logos, the divine power, changes the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ." "While the early writers clearly had in mind the Logos,...., they applied to him the name 'Spirit of God,' ...'Power of God,' 'Wisdom of God,' and even 'Holy Spirit.' In an 11th century liturgical scroll from Constantinople, the HA composition occurs in a miniature opposite the passage with the prayer of Epiclesis, calling down the Spirit on the gifts. It is difficult to decipher whether the central angel there is specifically marked as Logos. See A. Grabar, "Un Rouleau Liturgique Constantinopolitan et ses Peintures," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, no. 8 (1954), 169, #15 and 175.

¹⁸ *Antologiya*, fig. 25, and fig. 32. For an analysis of the hesychast symbolism of the larger program in which Feofan Grek's HA composition appears, —the frescoes in the Trinity chapel of the Church of the Transfiguration in Novgorod in 1378—, see L. Lifshitz, "Freski Feofana Greka v Troitskom pridele tserkvi Spasa na Il'ine ulitse," in *Drevnerusskoe Iskusstvo*, (S. Petersburg: Dmitri Bulanin, 2002), 269-287.

from the monastery of Vatopedi on Mt. Athos testifies to the direct influence of WBH on HA. There Abraham's tent is portrayed as a cupola-like structure with seven divisions by analogy to the seven columns of Wisdom's house (fig. 5).¹⁹

Andrei Rublev structured his version of HA to present a more sophisticated theological understanding of the transcendence being manifest, and to relate it to the Trinity's creative interaction. He therefore drew on other passages from the Pseudo-Areopagite which served his purpose, following the same path as certain hesychast-inspired representations of WBH. They all made use of the circle and Wisdom's chalice as paired symbols and organizing metaphors of their compositions.²⁰

In the writings of the Areopagite, the circle and Wisdom's chalice evoke God's transcendence as a self-identity which paradoxically "exceeds" its limits in interaction with an "other;" As a result this "other" is able to know its own ontological nature, its inner being in God. This interaction occurs through the motion of God and realizes an inner stillness and divine self-containment. Together stillness and motion communicates the Trinity's essential oneness.²¹ The relational understanding of transcendence was a powerful hesychast response to the idea that God's transcendence is unknowable by definition.

Rublev's OTT modeled transcendence in this relational way. He therefore chose other means to emphasize the idea of revealed transcendence than by portraying the central angel as Angel of Great Counsel. He built his composition up from a less widespread variant of HA where the three angels were equal

¹⁹ See *Antologija*, fig. 26.

²⁰ See for example an early 14th century fresco in the tower of the Rila monastery in present-day Bulgaria. I have discussed its hesychast symbolism at a paper delivered at the Holy Trinity Seminary in Jordanville N.Y., May 7, 2003, "The Star of Wisdom: At the Intersection of Poetics and Theology." See also a mid-15th or mid-16th century Novgorod icon of Wisdom's house (its dating is disputed). Both can be seen in J. Meyendorff, "Wisdom-Sophia...", figs 3a, 4. In the composition in the Rila monastery, the chalice is foregrounded and enlarged on an altar table. It occurs in a framing context of concentric circles. In the Novgorod icon a large chalice appears over the head of Christ-Wisdom in concentric circles and a multiplicity of smaller ones are on the table below where Wisdom's feast is offered. See G.M. Prokhorov, *Pamiatniki*, 26.

²¹ V. A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 325 cites a passage concerning Divine Wisdom from the Areopagite's "Epistle to Titus" to show that this paradoxical stillness in motion is the heart of Rublev's icon.

(fig. 6).²² He projected them onto a hidden circle, divested the composition of extraneous historical references, and raised up the remaining composition to a symbolic level which manifests their relationship with each other and the Church.²³

The symbolism of the circle reflects chapter 9:9 in Dionysius the Areopagite's treatise "On the Divine Names."²⁴

The motion of God does not signify a change of place, a variation, an alteration,...the circular movement signifies that God remains identical with Himself, that He envelops in synthesis the intermediate parts and the extremities, which are at the same time containers and contained, and that He recalls to Himself all that has gone forth from Him.²⁵

Maximus the Confessor, in his commentary on chapter 9:9 directed the reader of this passage to chapter 4:9. There as St. Maximus noted, the Areopagite wrote that "similar [circular] movements" were applicable to "angels, souls and bodies."²⁶

The Areopagite's circle could signify the dual, circular action of outflowing and return which creates divine self-identity —when the Godhead flows out to the "extremities," i.e. humankind, and gives knowledge of Himself, and the saint inwardly returns in mind and body by a circular movement of mental prayer.²⁷ Ico-

²² See *Antologiya*, 30, a fresco of 1412-31 from the church of the Mother of God in the village of Nabakhtevi, Georgia. This icon is the closest to Rublev's icon of any that I have found. I accept E.Ia. Ostashenko's argument that the famous Sergiev-Posad Holy Trinity icon is later than Rublev's and influenced by it. See "Ikona 'Troitsa Vekhozavetnaia' iz Sergievo-posadskogo muzeia-zapovednika i problema stil'ia zhivopisi pervoi treti XVv." in *Drevnerusskoe Iskusstvo: Vizantiia, Rus', Zapadnaia Evropa: Iskusstvo i kul'tura*, (S. Petersburg: Dmitri Bulanin, 2002) 324.

²³ See F. Benoit, "L'Icon de la Trinité de Roublev, in *Renaissance de Fleury*, bulletin trimestriel de l'Association des amis de Saint-benoit de Fleury, Chateaufort-sur-Loire, (April 1978), fig. 2.

²⁴ Scholars who endow this circle with theological significance related to the Areopagite include L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989) 202 and A.A. Saltykov, "O znachenii areopagitik v drevnerusskom iskusstve (K izucheniiu 'Troitsy' Andreia Rubleva)," *Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo XV-XVII vekov*, (M. 1981), 17. On its compositional and ideological significance see also V.A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 221, 287.

²⁵ See Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 202 and, for the Slavonic version, G.M. Prokhorov, *Dionisii Areopagit*, (St. Petersburg: "Glagol," 1995), 291. On the circle see also Abba Dorotheus, "Directions on Spiritual Training," #42, in E. Kadloubovsky and G.E.H. Palmer, *Early Fathers from the Philokalia*, (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd, 1954), 164-5 and its likely source in "On The Divine Names," 5:6.

²⁶ For the Confessor's commentary, see G. Prokhorov, *Dionisii Areopagit*, 291.

²⁷ For this related complex of themes, see J. Meyendorff, "Le theme du 'retour en soi' dans la doctrine palamite du XIV siècle," in *Byzantine Hesychasm: historical, theological and social problems*, (London: Variorum Reprints, 1974), esp. 204-206.

nographers of WHB used the circle to embody the meaning of Wisdom indwelling in Its house; the circle implied that this indwelling manifests an essential wholeness through a reciprocal inner motion on the part of God and humankind taking place during Wisdom's "feast," the Eucharist.

Rublev projected his three angels on to a circle to symbolize the reciprocal movement within the very Godhead which comprises its self-identity. The round chalice at the circle's center alludes to the process of actualizing this self-identity—first, the divine outflowing during the Eucharist which made the Church a "container" of the Godhead; second, the inner return movement of the faithfuls' souls during communion to the God who "contains" them.

The chalice served as a dominant symbol together with the circle because it existed within the same field of meaning.²⁸ The Areopagite interpreted the chalice in his exegesis of Proverbs 9:1-5. He wrote in his "Epistle to Titus the hierarch." "Asking...what is the house of wisdom, what is the mixing bowl, and what are its foods and drinks:"

The round and open chalice is a symbol of the providence, which has neither a beginning or ending, open and flowing into all. Although it spreads out into everything, it remains within itself and stands in immovable identity, completely confirmed and contained in itself. Solidly and unshakably stands the chalice.²⁹

The Areopagite is not sacrificing the first meaning of the chalice as a symbol of the Eucharist, according to the traditional ex-

²⁸ V.A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 288 emphasizes the central significance of the chalice in its Eucharistic symbolism and shows that the interior silhouettes of the two side angels form a chalice. See reproduction 8.

²⁹ See G.M. Prokhorov, "Poslanie Titu-ierarkhu Dionisiia Areopagita," *TODRL* 38 (1985) 7-41, especially 33-34. For an unfelicitous, English translation, see *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 280-289, esp. 286. This citation is my translation from the Old Slavonic. The hesychast ecumenical patriarch, Filofei, cited the Areopagite's interpretation of the bowl as a symbol of divine self-identity more than once in his three treatises interpreting Proverbs 9. See *Tri rechi*, 57, and 100-101. There he synthesizes the Areopagite's writing about the chalice with his understanding of divine self-identity. "Rech' simvolicheski ukazyvaet na ...eto ...Promysl ne otstupaet ot svoi neizmeniaemosti i nepodvizhnosti, no v tom zhe samom dome Svocem, v nepodvizhnom, ne vykhodiashchem iz sebia, neizmennom i vseгда odinakovom sostoianii, proizvodit vse...."

egesis of the “food” and “drink” Wisdom offers in Proverbs 9. He is simply investing the chalice with a second ontological meaning. This second meaning refers to the movement by which God realizes the “all in all” and embodies His own essential self-sameness and immovability. The solid and unshakeable Chalice alludes to the inviolability and stillness which occurs when the Godhead flows into the Church during the liturgy and Wisdom fills its House, realizing the divine self-identity. Those compositions which actualized this meaning paired the chalice with the circle to mark their shared ontological dimension.

Rublev’s OTT lifted HA to an ontological level in other ways as well. Rublev divested the composition of all its historical or accidental features. Thus he did away with Abraham and Sara, with utensils on the table, with explicit references to the scene from Genesis 18. He integrated the traditional chalice with the calf’s head, the house of Sara, and the oak of Mamre into his higher theological paradigm (adding a mountain as well). The chalice’s place at the center of a hidden circle, and its size and isolation raised it to the role of dominant symbol, providing us with a context within which to read the icon. This context illuminates the intent and meaning of Rublev’s unusual portrayal of the angels and unique use of background features.

First let us examine his treatment of the three angels in the foreground. Rublev exceeded tradition when he endowed each angel with features pertaining to the action of the three Trinitarian Persons.³⁰ First of all, he made them mirrors of one another in a marked manner which alluded to hesychast theology. His use of the color blue referred to the hesychast understanding of the Trinity’s ontological power, i.e., to the uncreated energies common

³⁰ Scholars have noted Rublev’s pioneering role in symbolizing the personal distinctions within the Trinity. See for instance, G. Bunge, *L’Iconographie...*, 93, and L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 202. The latter stress that “it is not a representation ...of the three Persons of the Godhead....[but] symbolically reveals....its [the Trinity’s] triune action in the world.” Others emphasize that the angels symbolize the Divine Counsel, which is the creative action of the Trinity regarding the world. See N. Golubtsov, “Presviataia Troitsa i domostroitel’svo,” *Zhurnal Moskovskoi patriarkhii*, no. 7 (1960), 37. V.A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 326 and footnote 509 concludes that the angels can be read in multiple ways to symbolize each of the hypostases and argues against the view of Iu.G. Malkov that all three angels represent Christ in his aspect of revealing the Trinity and that the central Angel is Christ revealing the Father.

to the three Persons. Hesychast renditions of the Transfiguration composition used this same blue to signify Christ's historical manifestation of the uncreated light which the Son shares with the Father.³¹ The blue in Rublev's icon symbolizes the angel's mutual indwelling in one another and the resulting transcendent unity.

Blue occurs in garments whose drapery refers to different modalities of the divine motion in relation to the Church. For instance the second, central angel's blue outer garment faces us and flows downward over his left shoulder and his tunic toward the chalice. It alludes to Christ's outflowing through the Spirit when He condescends into the flesh and offers Himself as a sacrifice. Its external position alludes to our ability to see and know God in the flesh in history. This action tells us that, as was traditional, the middle Angel symbolizes Christ's Power or Wisdom.

The blue garment of the third angel to his left is also on the left shoulder, and echoes the second angel's drapery. However, the blue occurs in the inner garment instead of the outer and refers to the inner workings of the Godhead. This same blue garment also emerges into view at the third angel's feet. It continues the outward and downward motion of the Christ-angel's outer garment and indicates how the Spirit continues Christ's work. Thus the drapery indicates that the third angel embodies the action of the Spirit.³²

By contrast, the blue of the first angel's inner garment suffuses his outer garment, which is draped over both shoulders. The blue is visible and uncovered at his center, and it also shines from within through the symmetrical outer garment as whitish-bluish highlights. The blue's penetration of two layers and its centeredness summarizes the outer and inner action of the other two angels

³¹ See Rublev's own Transfiguration fresco in the Uspenskii Cathedral in Vladimir of 1408 in V.G. Briusova, *Andrei Rublev i Moskovskaia shkola zhivopisi*, (Moskva: "Russkii mir," 1998), 351; and a late 14th century hesychast miniature of the Transfiguration included in the hesychast Byzantine emperor's, John Cantacuzenus', theological writings in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261-1557)*, (N.Y.: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 286. On the predominance of the color blue and its varying shades and appearances in this icon, see *Katalog*, 286. On its symbolic significance see also N.A. Demina, *Troitsa Andreia Rubleva*, (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1963), 78-9.

³² See *Katalog*, 288. On the differing scholarly interpretations of the angels' relation to the divine persons, see Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 302-326.

and signifies the origin of the divine action in the Father-angel. In this way the portrayal of the three angels indicates the energetic oneness of the three Persons through their personal distinctions. The interplay of the color blue among the three angels likens it to uncreated energy realizing self-identity through movement. This functionality embodies the ontological meaning of the circle and the chalice.

The angels' expressions and attitudes build on this dynamic self-identity. Their inward expressions realize their mutual indwelling. Turning within themselves, they heed their common energy. In contrast to this inwardness, they tilt their heads to one another. This gesture implies that the shared oneness they know within is manifest without by their relation to one another and to their mission regarding the world.

The Son- and Spirit-angels tilt to the Father-angel who is their source to signify that they are revealing His Oneness. At the same time, they are tilting backwards to Him to indicate that they realize His Oneness by a dynamic of return. He tilts to the Spirit-angel to confirm the Spirit's role in bringing about the return begun by Christ's death and resurrection. The Father-angel blesses the chalice because the Spirit flows into it and returns the Church to God by making Christ's mystical body present in the liturgical meal.

An outward motion is integral and opposite to the process of return. It is implicit in the Father-angel's tilt. The flow of the other two angels' drapery echoes this outward tilt and counterbalances the returning movement of their heads. Their two raised left knees seems to signify a movement into the world in stages, first Son and then Spirit even as The Father-angel's raised right knee closes off the circle to suggest self--containment.³³ The Father-angel's symmetrical garments and hands reflect the resulting stasis and equilibrium. They symbolize the self-identity and self-containment implied by the circle and the chalice respectively.

³³ See A.A. Saltykov, "Ikonoграфия 'Troitsy'", 83 and 84 on the paradoxical combination of motion and stillness in the angels' gestures and particularly their knees. My interpretation differs somewhat.

This dynamic counterpoint is an interaction of the Two and the One. It results in the equilibrium embodied in the Father-angel whereby Rublev identifies the mystery of self-identity with the person of the Father. The Father angel's symmetrical wholeness resolves the oppositions inner and outer, two and the one; it shows how the Godhead in three "remain[s] itself and continu[es] to be its unaltered self" through a movement of outflowing and return.

The background features participate in this dynamic and are associated with the personal modalities of the three angels respectively, as they relate to the world's salvation. As we shall see, they all signify height and allude to the circular process of inner ascent, deification, resurrection in the Spirit by which the Church responds to the circular motion of the Godhead.

The rock behind the Spirit-angel is actually a mountain, rising up and tilting toward the rising tree behind the Christ-angel. In common hesychast literary and iconographic symbolism, the mountain alludes to the mental ascent to vision of the triune God through indwelling Spirit. The mountain of intellectual ascent was featured in the iconography of Christ's Transfiguration. In OTT, the chalice, the Spirit-angel and the mountain tell us that this ascent is occurring through the action of the Spirit during the Eucharist.³⁴

The tree, as was traditional, alludes to the redeeming power of Christ's condescension in the flesh and of His crucifixion.³⁵ The

³⁴V. A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 197, 348 provides one earlier precedent for the appearance of a mountain in HA, a 14th century icon from the Church of Cosmas and Damian in Rostov which includes three cups, three background features, three branches on the tree, etc. He speculates that St. Sergius' family might have taken a copy with them to Radonezh. The mountain of ascent was first of all associated with Moses' vision of God. In the icon of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah are typically placed on either side of the same mountain as Christ or on their own mountains to signify the places where they saw God. Three mountains appear in the late 14th century hesychast miniature in *Byzantium: Faith and Power*, 286. See also, David Balfour, *St. Gregory the Sinaite, Discourse on the Transfiguration*, (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1986), section 8, 29-30. "Now there (on Horeb) Moses had previously seen in the darkness that the one God 'who is' was a triune God;" Dionysios the Areopagite emphasized that Moses experienced a "mental ascent." See "The Mystical Theology," 1:3 in *Pseudo-Dionysios: The Complete Works*, 136-7. Gregory Palamas in J. Meyendorff (ed.), *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*, (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1983), 77 wrote, citing John of Damascus, Canon II for the Feast of the Transfiguration, "Come let us ascend the holy and heavenly mountain, let us contemplate the immaterial divinity of the Father and the Spirit, which shines forth in the only Son."

³⁵ The tree occurs frequently in the tradition as a reference to the oak of Mamre of Genesis 18 and often took on symbolic value associated with the middle angel. See for instance a late 14th





Fig.5. Late 14th century, Mount Athos. From *Troitsa Andreia Rubleva: Antologiya*. Moscow: Isskustvo, 1981.

ΗΓΙΟΣ ΕΝΙΣ

ΤΟΥ ΔΕΥΤΕΡΟΥ

ΗΓΙΑ

ΤΡΙΑΣ





Fig.6. Early 15th century Georgian fresco. From *Troitsa Andreia Rubleva: Antologiya*. Moscow: Isskustvo, 1981.

mountain almost touches the tree because Christ's crucifixion made way for the descent of the Spirit during the liturgy.³⁶ The tree's height alludes to the resulting resurrection of the soul during one's lifetime, an interior ascent associated with the mountain. The spiraling structure of the foliage is Rublev's innovation and could allude to chapter 4 of "On The Divine Names," where the soul's circular motion is the inverse of God's, and turns inward from external things to rise up.³⁷ Together, mountain and tree refer to the path and power of return to the Father through the inner action of Son and Spirit portrayed immediately below. For this reason, both mountain and tree share their respective angel's tilt.³⁸ They realize the meaning of the hidden circle that "He recalls to Himself all that has gone forth from Him."

The destination towards which the mountain and the tree tilt is the house towering above the Father-angel's head.³⁹ Like the Father-angel, it embodies self-identity and wholeness. The house is a unit with two dark doors, two levels and two front columns. The fact that one door is lower and in the background and one is higher and in the foreground connects them with the Son- and Spirit-angels respectively. The lower door suggests the Son's condescension into the world; the upper door, the Spirit's raising the world to God. These two doors open into darkness, the mystery of the One, embodied by the building as a total structure and by the Father Angel below it. This structure reflects the union of the

century icon from a Trinity church in the Vologda region in *Antologija*, # 27 and an early 15 th century Novgorod icon in *Antologija*, #32. To understand the uniqueness of its spiraling structure in Rublev's icon, see the illustration of 17 iconographic variants in V.A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 523.

³⁶ It is this baptism of the Spirit that may have been symbolized by later copies of Rublev's icon where water flows from the rock. Bunge's interpretation of this rock as an allusion to the Pentecost according to John: 14 does not contradict our thesis about the icon's higher meaning. See *L'Iconographie...*, 106.

³⁷ The original tree has been painted over, presumably in a way that respects the indications remaining in the original icon, where the contour of the tree and fragments of the foliage were visible. See *Katalog*, 288. On the spiral, see "On the Divine Names," 5: 5-8 and 11:2.

³⁸ V.A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 295, explains the tilt as an effort to compensate for the "distancing" of the background figures due to their miniature scale and compares this alleged distancing to works of Duccio and Giotto! On the "Sofinost" of this icon, see also V.A. Plugin, *Master Sviatoi Troitsy*, 324-327.

³⁹ V.I. Antoneva and N.E. Mneva, *Katalog*, 286 identify it as "palaty Avraama," Abraham's tent. An equally tall structure without the same symbolic value, and with Sara in front can be found in a late 14th century icon from a Trinity church in the Vologda region. See *Antologija*, # 27.

Two and the One. Its balanced and open nature reflects the meaning of the open chalice which also stands “solidly and unshakably,” symbolizing self-identity.

Like the Father angel’s two-sided garments suffused with the central underlying blue, the structure’s symmetries signify a center, which both summarizes and gives rise to the action of Two. This functionality alludes to a circular movement realizing the “providence which has no beginning and ending.” On the one hand, the house signifies arrival, the place of return. On the other, its porch opens out onto the “feast” in the foreground as though offering an invitation and a new beginning. Indeed its high porch alludes to the place where Wisdom issues her invitation in Proverbs 8:2 and 9:3, where “She standeth at the top of high places, by the way in the places of the paths. She crieth at the gates, at the entry of the city, at the coming in at the doors.” Thus the house, like the Father-angel below, embodies the mystery of the Trinity’s wholeness which is always being realized even as it is always complete.

The position of the house above the Father-angel’s head suggests that it is the product of the creative thought He shares with the Son- and Spirit-angels. At the same time it contains this thought by implicitly framing the foreground action where the three angels experience thoughtful intercommunion. Both a “container” of and contained within the creative thought, the house realizes the symbolism of the hidden circle. Rublev painted blue the outer edge of the house, the edge nearest the Father-angel, to make sure that the viewer would connect it with the energies the Father shares with Son and Spirit.⁴⁰ This association indicates that these energies, which create the world, dwell in the world-church as well. The presence of the blue functions in an analogous way as the seven columns of Wisdom’s house in WBH and also shows that the Spirit of Wisdom is indwelling in its house.

Every feature of OTT, in the foreground and in the background, together and individually, embodies the meanings implicit in the hidden circle and the chalice. They all share in the discourse

⁴⁰ See *Katalog*, fig. 192 and p. 286.

about "Wisdom building its house and offering a feast." They thus testify to the role of the chalice as a controlling metaphor in the ontological meaning derived from the Areopagite's interpretation of Proverbs 9.

OTT's synthesis of HA and WBH made the presence of Sara and Abraham unnecessary. According to Proverbs 8 and 9, Wisdom sent an invitation to the "sons of men," and Christian exegesis saw this as a prophecy of universal redemption offered by the New Testament Church. Wisdom's feast implicitly involves broader participation, —the universal Christian Church. Implicitly, the meal which the angels contemplate is being offered to all, including the icon's viewers over time.

Rublev's allusion to Wisdom's feast openly placed the idea of "hospitality" in a reciprocal framework modelling the divine self-identity. On the first level of interpretation, the meal alludes to the Church's offerings of food to God, and on the second, it alludes to God's offering a feast of knowledge to all. This implied reciprocity was yet another way that Rublev realized his profound conception of the Trinity's transcendence.

Rublev models his relational conception of transcendent wholeness by making his message and his medium one. From a poetic point of view, the icon manifests the "all in all" conveyed on the semantic level. Nothing is extraneous or accidental, detached from the nexus of meaning. There are no historical or dogmatic bald spots equivalent to vain speech. Every image relates to the others and to the controlling metaphors of the circle and the chalice. All is embodied oneness, both the word and the silence of God.

Thus Rublev endowed HA with unprecedented depth of meaning and formal perfection. He did not do so in a vacuum. His creativity responded to the problematics of his age and condition as a hesychast monk, brought up in the spirituality of the Holy Trinity Sergius monastery.⁴¹ He found a unique solution to the

⁴¹ On the hesychast culture of the Trinity Sergius monastery at this time, see G. Prokhorov, "Keleinaia isikhastikaia literatura...v biblioteke Troitse-Sergievoi lavry s XIV do XVII v., in *Trudy otdela drevne-russkoi literatury*, [TODRL], vol. 28, (1974) 317-325. On the copies of the works of Dionysios the Areopagite done in the age of Metropolitan Kiprian and St. Sergius, see G.M. Prokhorov, *Pamiatniki*, 51. On Metropolitan Kiprian and his international form of hesychast

challenge of symbolizing how the divine transcendence presupposes experiential human knowledge of God. His desire to model the action of divine Wisdom led him to go beyond his predecessors and draw from a repertory of symbols available in the works of Dionysios the Areopagite. At the same time, he was following a trend where the compositions HA and WBH reflected shared creative intuitions in response to the hesychast agenda. A unique blend of HA and WBH, OTT is a meditation on the ontological truth of both compositions.

This study has found an answer to the meaning and creative intention of Rublev's Old Testament Trinity icon by examining the cultural context that informed it. While scholars have posited the broad influence of hesychast spirituality and of Dionysios the Areopagite, poetic analysis suggests that specific symbolism both inspired and informed Rublev's innovative poetic composition. The esoteric meaning of the circle and the chalice offer viable explanations for the icon's integral wholeness and exceptional power of expression. This study has brought to light both the possible secrets of this integrity and its role of conveying the essential truths of his age. However, the icon embodies the revealed transcendence which is its theme. It is veiled in mystical silence and any definitive solution must remain beyond reach.

spirituality, see P. Syrku, *K istorii ispravleniia knig v Bolgarii v XIV v.* (St. Petersburg: Tip. Imper. Ak. nauk, 1898), 252-255.