

I T H E A

International Journal
INFORMATION **MODELS**
&
ANALYSES

2019 **Volume 8** **Number 3**

**International Journal
INFORMATION MODELS AND ANALYSES
Volume 8 / 2019, Number 3**

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International Journal "INFORMATION MODELS AND ANALYSES" Volume 8, Number 3, 2019

Edited by the **Institute of Information Theories and Applications FOI ITHEA**, Bulgaria, in collaboration with:

University of Telecommunications and Posts, Bulgaria,

V.M.Glushkov Institute of Cybernetics of NAS, Ukraine,

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, Spain,

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Publisher: **ITHEA®** Sofia, 1000, P.O.B. 775, Bulgaria. www.ithea.org, e-mail: office@ithea.org

Technical editor: **Ina Markova**

Printed in Bulgaria

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ISSN 1314-6416 (printed)

ISSN 1314-6432 (Online)

JUSTINIAN I, THE MONOPHYSITES AND THE ARCHBISHOPRIC JUSTINIANA PRIMA

Jordan Tabov

Abstract: *Some details of Christian beliefs and church practice on the territory of the Ohrid Archbishopric point to a possible connection with the faith and rituals of the early Christians in the same lands. This gives grounds for exploring the possible links of St. Paul's teaching – “The Paulicianism” – with the “heretical” from our contemporary point of view beliefs of the monophysites (under Emperor Justinian I) and the Bogomils, as well as with the doctrines and practices of the Ohrid Archbishopric beyond the reign of Justinian I.*

Keywords: *monophysites, Emperor Justinian I, Bogomils, Ohrid Archbishopric Justiniana Prima.*

Monophysitic ideas among the first Christians

What was Jesus Christ - man or God? And how did he "come down" from Heaven to Earth, to the humans?

On such questions the first Christians have given different answers. Later some of their views about the "nature" of Jesus Christ were declared heretical. Among these views stands out the Docetism that existed at the end of the 1st c.

For our study, it is important to pay attention to the views of the Docets that Christ was not born by the Virgin; that he was never a “baby”; that he has accepted a human body in the sky, and having gone through a “channel”, the part of which the Virgin has played, and thus has come to the people in this human body [Losskii, 1991, Chapter 15 in Part IV].

Similar notions of the “passing of Jesus through the Mother of God” were characteristic of other Christian teachings, which today are described as heretical. For example, the monophysites imagined that “Christ ... has gone through the Virgin

without taking anything from Her, but only used Her to appear" [Losskii, 1991, Chapter 15 in Part IV].

Justinian and the Monophysites

During the reign of Justinian I, fierce disputes between the "orthodox" and the monophysitic theologians were exacerbated. Monophysites have benefited from the favour of Empress Theodora, Justinian's wife. Justinian was trying to reconcile the warring parties. He himself became more and more entangled in theological matters; was interested in the doctrine of the aftartodocets.

Therefore, the following question is natural: to what extent does the Christian "theory and practice" of Justiniana Prima reflect the sympathies of Justinian towards some monophysitic ideas? One more thing: How much Justinian himself was influenced by the Christian ideas and practices of his "fatherland" – his native Christian beliefs in Dardania?

The Monophysites, the Paulicians and the Bogomils about the "coming down of Jesus Jesus from Sky to Earth"

The territory of Ohrid Archbishopric occupies a central place in the diocese of Justiniana Prima. There, on these lands, one of the most famous heretical teachings – Bogomilism, is born and thrived. Had it anything to do with the Monophysitism? A very important common detail in the teaching of the Monophysites and the Bogomils is "the passing of Jesus through Virgin Mary as through a channel." The belief that "Christ has taken His flesh into heaven and passed through Her (Mary) as through a channel" the Bogomils have adopted of their "ideological brothers" – the Paulicians [Anguelov, 1993, 18-19].

Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary

"The passing of Jesus through Virgin Mary as through a channel" is depicted on frescoes in many old churches in the territory of the Ohrid Archbishopric. This storyline usually occupies a central place in the church – such is the case of the church "St. Dimitar" in Ohrid (**Figure 1**).

The circular “mandorla” in which Jesus is depicted is in fact the “channel” through which He descends to the Earth; the concentric circles in the mandorla are images of the crystal spheres that, according to the perceptions of the medieval science about the Universe, are between the globular Earth – the center of the Universe – and the Heavenly Sphere of the fixed stars, behind which is the Empyreus, the expanse of God and the angels.



Figure 1. Virgin Mary with Jesus Christ. Fresco in the church “St. Dimitar” in Ohrid.

Similar is the fresco in the church “St. Petka” in the village of Vukovo, in Western Bulgaria (**Figure 2**).

The same storyline with a slightly different form of the “mandorla” is also seen in the apse of the church “St. Sofia” in Ohrid (**Figure 3**). From the fragment of this fresco presented in **Figure 4** we see Jesus Christ coming out of the “tunnel”: His right hand is already outside the mandorla and therefore outside the tunnel-channel.



Figure 2. Virgin Mary Oranta. Fresco in the church “St. Petka” in the village of Vukovo, Western Bulgaria [Church of St Petka, 2019].



Figure 3. Virgin Mary Nicopea. 11th century. Partly restored fresco in the apse of the church “St. Sofia” in Ohrid [Chausidis, 2003, 428].

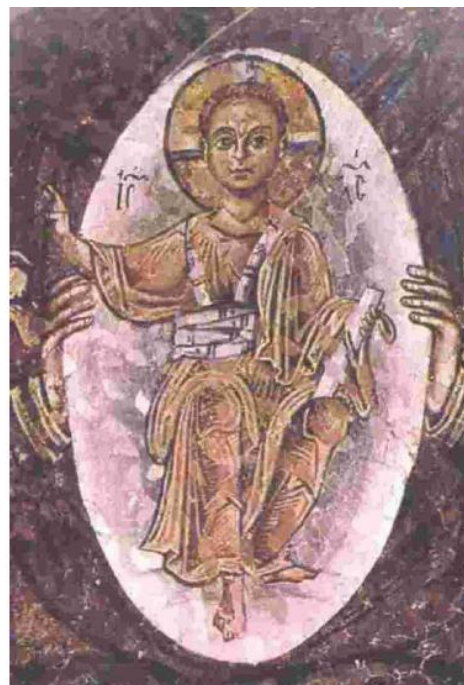


Figure 4. Jesus Christ. Fragment of the fresco “Virgin Mary Nicopea” in the apse of the church “St. Sofia” in Ohrid.

Jesus creates Adam and Eve

On one of the miniatures of the famous Bulgarian manuscript with the translation of the Manasses Chronicle, we see Jesus Christ as “the creator of Adam and Eve” (**Figure 5**). It thus appears that Jesus existed long before the birth of Virgin Mary, and therefore can not be her Son in the physical sense; that He is the only God Whom the Catholics and Orthodox share in three parts – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.



Figure 5. Jesus Christ in the role of “the creator of Adam and Eve” on one of the miniatures of the famous Bulgarian manuscript with the translation of the Manasses Chronicle [Dzhurova, Dimitrov, 1979].

The Holy Trinity of Tikvesh

In modern Christian theology, interpretations exist, according to which in the Old Testament there are preliminary hints about the Holy Trinity. In this regard, one of the most discussed texts is the story of how the Lord appeared to Abraham in the Mamrish oaks (Genesis 18: 1-10).

The same narrative, with some modifications to the details, is found in the old manuscript from Tikvesh. There it is titled “Word for the Holy Trinity” and begins like this:

“Abram always had the custom of not eating without guests. But the devil had stopped all the ways so that no one would come to Abram. And Abram spent five days without eating. God saw his patience and descended himself with the archangels Michael and Gabriel, pretending to be passersby who were walking along the road. And when he saw them from afar, Abram rejoiced greatly, and said, Glory to Thee, O our God, that Thou hast sent me guests, that I may eat bread in my house. And he greeted Them, and worshiped Them, and said unto Them, “Brethren, come to my house to eat bread!” They said to him, “We are quick to work, we will not come.” Abram prayed with abundant tears, but They did not want. Abram said, “My God, come home because my heart is stiff like in ice from hunger.” And then They came.

When Sarah saw them, she put water on the fire to wash Their feet. And when she washed Them, he said to himself, “Oh, great miracle, I have washed my feet all over here, but I have not seen such a miracle. I touch them, and they slip through my hands.” [Petkanova, 1982].

This text gives the impression that the combination of the Holy Trinity in the title refers to: God (the Lord) and the archangels Michael and Gabriel.

This understanding of the term “Holy Trinity” is definitely different from the Trinitarian – canonical Catholic-Orthodox.

The Word of the Holy Trinity is a part of a cycle of apocrypha, touching various moments of Abram's life from his youth to his death, which in some collections are arranged in chronological order, and thus a whole story is given about Abram. This apocrypha, in general, adheres to the biblical account of Abram, distinguishing from him in some details. It was spread mainly among the southern Slavs, and there are differences between the variants in the manuscripts [Petkanova, 1982, 356-357]. The view expressed in it that the “Holy Trinity” means the Triplet 1) God, Lord; 2) Archangel Michael; and 3). Archangel Gabriel essentially excludes from the traditional trinitarian notion of the Holy Trinity the Holy Spirit and one of the pair of God-Father and Jesus Christ, and in their place includes the two most authoritative archangels Michael and Gabriel. The views that the Christian God is a single person are called unitary.

The story of the Lord's appearance on the Mamrish oaks (Genesis 18: 1-5) has had and has different interpretations. Procopius of Gaza (Procopius of Gaza, about 465 - about 528, a Christian theologian, orator and sophist, known above all with his comments on the Old Testament and his letters to a wide range of contemporaries) mentions three of the views. "As for the three men who appeared to Abram," he writes, "some say that these were three angels; others – that one of the three is God, and the rest are his angels; and others – that this is the prototype of the most holy and single-minded Trinity" [Procopius Gazaeus, 1865, col. 363].

Below, we will look at images that are probably caused by the "Tikvesh" idea of the Holy Trinity.

We will briefly analyze some basic features and specific details of the images in the examples of **Figures 6, 7, 8** and **9**.

1)) The central subject of the composition in these images is a triplet of Angel-like figures.



Figure 6. Holy Trinity. Icon. Andrey Rublev, Moscow, circa 1422-1442.



Figure 7. Left: Holy Trinity. Fresco in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Monastery of St. John the Theologian on Patmos Island [Collection of Icons, 2019]. The end of the XII c. **Right:** detail of this fresco.

2)) In two of the above four images, the angel-like figures are called the Holy Trinity, in one there may have been a word “Trinity”, but this place is damaged. The meaning of the composition, that has been invoked both by the icon-writers and by the Christians worshipping this icon, perhaps has been the literal, although it may not have been the same for different Christians, but depending on the notion which each one of them has had for the Holy Trinity.

3)) The inscription “Jesus Christ,” which is present on many of these types of images (here on **Figure 8** and **Figure 9**), defines Jesus Christ as the central figure in the composition.

4)) Unlike Jesus Christ, who is often painted with wings, God the Father has never been drawn with wings. Consequently, by design (i.e. by the original idea of the author of the composition) He is not present on these images.

5)) The above-cited information of Procopius of Gaza shows that the storyline of the apocryphal Word for the Holy Trinity in the Tikvesh' Compilation is old and rooted in the times and concepts of the old Christianity. But this storyline is the same as the storyline of the above five images, which are the object of our analysis, so we can conclude that they are also a result of ideas and ideas of the first centuries of Christianity spreading.



Figure 8. Up: Holy Trinity. The end of the XVI c. Icon of the Iconographical school of Rostov and Suzdal [Forum of the Apostle Andrew, 2019]. **Down:** detail of this icon.



Figure 9. Up: Holy Trinity. The end of the XV c. Icon in Cathedral of St. Sophia in Novgorod [Russkaya Ikona, 2019]. **Down:** detail of this icon.

Conclusion

This analysis leads us to the hypothesis that a variant of Christian doctrine, which is not “canonical” – differs from Catholicism and Orthodoxy in one of the most important doctrines, has penetrated in the lands of today's Russia. How and where it has found its way to Russia? It can not be excluded that it has come from the region of Tikvesh – and this would be an additional argument in favor of the famous thesis that Kievan Russia has received its Christianity from the Ohrid Archbishopric.

Appendix

Text of Procopius of Gaza explaining three different interpretations of the story of Lord's appearance on the Mamrish oaks (Genesis 18: 1-5), as represented in [Procopius Gazaeus, 1865, col. 363].

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PROCOPII GAZÆI

ῬῬΓ

non dum erat glorificatus ²². ἡ Gloriam autem **A** χάνοντες Ἰουδαῖοι, καὶ περιτομήν ἔχοντες καρδίας ἐν
 Jesu, dicit ejus resurrectionem. Non igitur serviles πνεύματι, οὐ γράμματι.
 spiritus gestantes clamamus (ut monet Paulus ²³) : « Abba Pater : » sed in occulto sumus Judæi, et
 cordis circumcisionem habemus, que spiritu et non littera constat. Et sic instructi clamamus :
 « Abba Pater. »

CAP. XVIII.

ΚΕΦΑΛΑ. ΙΗ΄.

Vers. 1-5. Apparuit autem ei Deus in planitie Mambre. Et ipse seiebat in ostio tabernaculi cum calesceret ipsa dies. Et levavit oculos suos et vidit, et ecce tres viri stabant juxta eum. Et videns eucurrit in occursum eorum de ostio tabernaculi, incurtatusque est ad terram, et dixit : Obsecro, Domine, si inveni gratiam in oculis tuis, ne, quaeso, transeas a servo tuo. Quidam perhibent tres illos viros fuisse tres angelos. Alii illos judaizare affirmant, qui non credant ex tribus illis unum esse Deum, reliquos duos in angelorum numerum esse referendos. Nec quoque desunt, qui docent historiam illam esse typum sanctæ et consubstantialis Trinitatis. Quia ad hos dicatur : Domine, etc., declarari unitatem substantiæ : quia tres viri apparent, insinuari personarum trinitatem. Neque vero in Hebraico textu

Ἦρθη δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ Θεὸς πρὸς τῇ ἐριτὶ τῇ Μαρ-
 ερῇ, καθημένου αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῆς θύρας τῆς σκηρῆς
 αὐτοῦ μεσημερίας· ἀναβλέψας δὲ τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς
 αὐτοῦ, εἶδε· καὶ ἰδοὺ τρεῖς ἄνδρες εἰστήκεισαν
 ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ. Καὶ ἰδὼν προσέειπεν εἰς συνάν-
 τησιν αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τῆς σκηρῆς αὐτοῦ, καὶ προσ-
 κύνησεν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, καὶ εἶπε· Κύριε, εἰ εὔρον
 χάριν ἐνώπιόν σου, μὴ παρέλιθῆς τὸν δοῦλόν
 σου. Τοὺς τρεῖς ἄνδρας οἱ μὲν τρεῖς ἀγγέλους φα-
 σιν, οἱ δὲ Ἰουδαίζοντες ἓνα μὲν τῶν τριῶν εἶναι λέ-
 γουσι τὸν Θεόν, ἀγγέλους δὲ τοὺς δύο, οἱ δὲ τύπον
 ἔχειν φασι τῆς ἁγίας καὶ ὁμοουσίου Τριάδος, πρὸς
 οὗς εἰρησθαι μοναδικῶς τὸ Κύριε· φαίνεται δὲ παν-
 ταχοῦ κατὰ τὸ Ἑβραϊκὸν ἐπὶ τῶν τριῶν καίμενον
 τὸ ἀφθεγκτον ὄνομα τὸ ἐπὶ μόνου γραφόμενον τοῦ
 Θεοῦ, τετραγράμματος ὄν καὶ ἐν τῇ ἱερατικῷ πετά-

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