

# Icon of the Last Judgment: A Detailed Analysis

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Figure 1 The Last Judgment

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## Introduction

The Last Judgment is one of the most important themes in Christian art. It is a combination of various Biblical stories from the Old and New Testament, and the Gospels unified into a single picture. Monumental and complex depictions of the Last Judgment are not only found in the Orthodox tradition. One of the most famous and largest in Western art is by Michelangelo, on the back wall of the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

The theme has universal appeal. It depicts the redemption of all mankind, a time when the justice of God is administered to the living and dead and when the second coming of the Savior replaces our temporal world with a perfect spiritual one. This story has universal appeal, as its theme of hope and redemption fulfills the yearnings of most of the world religions.

Earliest known depictions of this theme come from the Byzantine world in the 3rd century. The theme was introduced in 988, when Kievan Rus' was Christianized. Over the centuries, the iconography of the Last Judgment has become more complex, with new elements being added to its vocabulary as Christianity developed and spread. This icon also depicts some revered folk traditions which, over the years, have found their way into the iconographic canon.

This icon from the collection of the Museum of Russian Icons is a fine 17th century example, probably painted in the Yaroslavl region, an ancient Great Russian town on the upper Volga, 250 kilometers northeast of Moscow. As expected of an icon of this age, it shows evidence of several restorations of good quality, most recently in the 19th or early 20th century. The icon is not substantially altered from its original appearance.

The Last Judgment includes a variety of complex symbols and imagery which need to be separated to fully understand. This example, like all of the best depictions of this subject, presents a complete, harmonious and integrated whole of these complicated events.

On close observation you will note details of the story piece by piece. Starting at the top, you will note a banner with the sun and the moon at each end (Figure 2). This illustrates verses in the Apocalypse according to which the sky will be rolled up like a scroll (Rev. 6:14: "And the Heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together").

Below this banner are two crucial and central elements of this icon; the *Deesis* tier, in which Christ is flanked by the Mother of God and John the Baptist, who are asking Him to forgive sinners; and the *Etimasia* (or the "Throne Prepared"), a throne with the instruments of the Passion. Below this is a group of apostles judging the world alongside Christ; a circle of angels; and saints awaiting the Last Judgment.



2 Detail of scroll and the Deesis tier



3 A human soul facing Last Judgment

Our intention is to analyze the images in this teeming icon, one after the other. We will begin with the thematic center of the composition, "Christ in Judgment of the World." Here Christ is seated inside a round *mandorla* (a round or lozenge-shaped section in an icon) in the second tier from the top of the icon.

In front of Christ stand Mary (henceforth referred to as the "Mother of God" in correct Orthodox tradition) and John the Baptist, who, as supplicants for the human race, constitute the Small *Deesis* (from the Greek word for prayer), at the central component of the iconostasis in Orthodox churches. As a rule, the *Deesis* includes not just the Mother of God and John the Baptist addressing Christ in prayer but also the apostles and the most important church saints, praying to Christ on behalf of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Observe other motifs typical of Byzantine Last Judgment iconography: Adam and Eve kneeling before Christ at the "Throne Prepared;" a hand holding the pan of a scale, upon which is depicted a naked man representing a human soul facing the Last Judgment (Figure 3); the image of a "Kindly Adulterer" who is spared the suffering of Hell but deprived of the joys of Paradise; scenes from Heaven such as the "Bosom of Abraham;" the "Wise Thief", Dismas, depicted in white loin cloth and the march of the righteous into Heaven usually to the left of the panel.

The central visual element in this icon is the serpent, a uniquely Russian addition to the Last Judgment iconography. Called the "Serpent of Tribulations" or the sin worm (Figure 4), each circle represents a specific venial sin. The end of serpent connects directly to hell, presided over by a winged Satan in whose lap sits Judas holding a bag of coins which he received from the Romans when he betrayed Christ.

The sins for which devils are trying to indict the soul and subject it to torture should be read from top to bottom in order of increasing severity of each subsequent form of sin (Figure 5).<sup>2</sup>

This list of twenty corresponds to the number of sins in the first Russian edition of the *Life of Vasily the New*.<sup>3</sup> But in comparing the list of sins recorded in the Russian edition with the Greek text of the *Life of Vasily the New*, one sees that the icon adds several new sins (with corresponding torments) not present in the literary source, including denunciation, blasphemy, slander, self-love and despair. In addition, there are other sins, such as self-glorification and pride, which became increasingly significant as Russian society, holding special disdain for outward show and official pretense, attached increasing importance to a populist, leveling spirit.<sup>4</sup>

This icon features a detailed depiction of the vision of the prophet Daniel; the four temporal kingdoms that will be replaced by the new spiritual world.



4 Serpent of Tribulations

1 For greater detail see Ia. Mislevets, "Proiskhozhdenie Deisusa," in *Vizantiia. Iuzhnie slaviane i drevniaia Rus'*. *Sbornik statei v chest' Lazareva* (Moscow, 1973), 59-63. In representations of the Last Judgment such as this, however, the *Deesis* element is often reduced simply to Christ, the Mother of God, and John the Baptist; with, in rare cases, the Archangel Michael as a substitute for the figure of John.

2 Lists of sins, such as those on the "toll-houses," often begin with verbal sins, as for example in the saints life of *Vasily the New*. See Vilinskii, *Zhitie Vasillia Novogo...* Ch.II, 418-19.

3 For the most complete edition of this literary source see I. Shevirev, "Prepodobnogo ottsa nashego Avraamiia. Slovo o nebesnikh silakh i chego radi sozdan bist' chelovek," in *Izvestiia Imperatorskoi akademii nauk po otdeleniiu russkogo iazika i slovesnosti. Tom 9* (St. Petersburg, 1860), 182-92. See also Alexander Veselovskii, *Raziskaniia v oblasti russkogo duhovnogo stikha. vyp. 5, chast' XII* (St. Petersburg, 1899), 125-26.

4 Tsodikovich, 9.

- 1 *lzha* • lying
- 2 *skupost'* • greed
- 3 *yabednichestvo* • denunciation
- 4 *prazdnosloviye* • idle chatter
- 5 *gnev* • anger
- 6 *koshchun[stvo]* • blasphemy
- 7 *obyyadeniye* • gluttony
- 8 *piyanstvo* • drunkenness
- 9 *khula* • slander
- 10 *skvernosloviye* • foul language
- 11 *preliubodeyaniye* • adultery
- 12 *liubodeyaniye* • fornication
- 13 *nasil'stvo* • unjust condemnation to jail
- 14 *tshcheslaviye* • vanity
- 15 *srebrوليubiye* • striving for excess wealth
- 16 *samolubiye* • self-love
- 17 *otchayaniye* • despair
- 18 *ubiystvo* • murder
- 19 *slavoliubiye* • self-glorification
- 20 *gordost'* • pride

5 List of sins written on the Serpent of Tribulations

In the lower right part of the composition, inside a pink circle (Figure 6), are the allegorical images of the four beasts symbolizing the four “doomed kingdoms” and illustrating the prophecy of Daniel, a standard item in Last Judgment icons (Dan. 7:3-8). The sea and the earth releasing the dead, as well as the four trumpeting angels from the scene of the resurrection of the dead, are themselves typically associated in the iconographic tradition with the four apocalyptic Angels “standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth” (Rev. 7:1).

Inside the sphere are the following inscriptions: on the bear showing his teeth, *tsarstvo perskoye* (the Persian Kingdom); on the four-headed, four-winged leopard, *ellinskoye tsarstvo* (the Hellenic Kingdom); below the winged lion, *vavilonskoye tsarstvo* (the Babylonian Kingdom); below the creature with ten horns, *tsarstvo rimskoye* (the Roman Kingdom). These inscriptions with the names of the kingdoms are clear and well-preserved. The association of these animals with specific kingdoms goes back to the most ancient interpretation of this story, as it was enunciated in the 3rd century by Hippolytus of Rome. The Kingdom of Rome, according to Hippolytus, was both the Kingdom of the Antichrist, and, more specifically, the Kingdom that gave rise to the Antichrist: “Ten horns will emerge from the mentioned Kingdom, when the time of this beast will come and the small horn who is Antichrist himself will suddenly appear among them; when the truth will perish on earth and the whole world will come to an end.

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### Christ in Judgment: The Thematic Center of the Composition

Our intention is to analyze the images in this teeming icon one after the other. We will begin with the thematic center of the composition, “Christ in Judgment of the World.” Here Christ is seated inside a round *mandorla* (a round or lozenge-shaped section in an icon) in the second tier from the top of the icon (Figure 7). The inscription in the open book he holds in one hand consists of the famous words: *Priidite ko mne vsi truzhdayushchiesia i obremeneni i az pokoyu vy* (“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28).<sup>5</sup>

In front of Christ stand Mary (henceforth referred to as the “Mother of God” in correct Orthodox tradition) and John the Baptist, who, as supplicants for the human race, constitute the Small *Deesis* (from the Greek word for prayer), at the central component of the iconostasis in Orthodox churches. As a rule, the *Deesis* includes not just the Mother of God and John the Baptist addressing Christ in prayer but also the apostles and the most important church saints, praying to Christ on behalf of the world.<sup>6</sup> The central meaning of the *Deesis* is the belief in the salvation of the human race, which became the key theological idea in the Byzantine representation of the Last Judgment. As the art historian Vladimir Tsodikovich notes, the presence of the Mother of God and of John the Baptist addressing Christ in a prayer for the salvation of the world indicates that a plea for salvation continues right up to the last day.<sup>7</sup>



6 Prophet Daniel's vision of the four doomed kingdoms

5 In transliterating Slavonic text, missing or unclear words have been placed in brackets.

6 For greater detail see Ia. Mislevets, “Proiskhozhdenie Deisusa,” in *Vizantiia. Iuzhnie slaviane i drevniaia Rus'. Sbornik statei v chest' Lazareva* (Moscow, 1973), 59-63. In representations of the Last Judgment such as this, however, the *Deesis* element is often reduced simply to Christ, the Mother of God, and John the Baptist; with, in rare cases, the Archangel Michael as a substitute for the figure of John.

7 Vladimir Tsodikovich, *Semantika ikonographii “Strashnogo Suda”* (Ulianovsk, 1995), 9.



7 The Mother of God, Christ and John the Baptist

At the feet of the Mother of God and of John the Baptist stand Adam and Eve, the first inhabitants of the earth. According to biblical tradition, their souls were raised out of Hell by the Savior during His Descent into Hell, along with other righteous pre-Christian worthies.

Since resurrection is supposed to be universal, the entire human race, an individual's body as well as soul, must face the Last Judgment, hence Last Judgments tend to be crowded with figures and filled with activity. Flanking the central group of figures, to the right and to the left of the Deesis we see the seated apostles (six on each side) holding books with inscriptions on the theme of the Last Judgment (Figure 8). They are shown in accordance with the epistle of Paul (1 Cor. 6:2-3) and the apocalyptic vision of the 24 elders, as recorded in Revelation 4:4; 4:10; 5:8, 13-14; 11:16-17; and 19:4.<sup>8</sup>

These elders represent the twelve apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel (although, generally, Last Judgment icons, including this icon, display only the apostles; this detail is usually referred to as "the apostolic tribunal").



8 Apostles (seated) and elders

The defining traits and halo inscriptions (the latter, somewhat damaged) are intended for the purpose of character identification, allow us to recognize the following figures: to the left of Christ (from left to right): 1. Phillip; 2. Simon the Zealot; 3. Andrew; 4. Mark; 5. John the Theologian; and 6. Peter. To the right of Christ are: 7. Paul; 8. Matthew; 9. James, the son of Zebedee; 10. Judas Thaddaeus, also called Judas Lebbaeus, as distinguished from Judas Iscariot; 11. James, the son of Alphaeus; and 12. Thomas. It should be noted that this row, which includes Paul and Luke, does not correspond to the evangelical twelve apostles.

The open books, held by the figures in the apostolic tribunal, alternate between threats and injunctions to repentance, warning about the imminence of the Last Judgment. These phrases derive from the Orthodox liturgy, from prayers, and from orally transmitted religious folklore traditions, and include the following:

In the hands of Simon the Zealot (2.), a common prayer (Figure 9):<sup>9</sup>

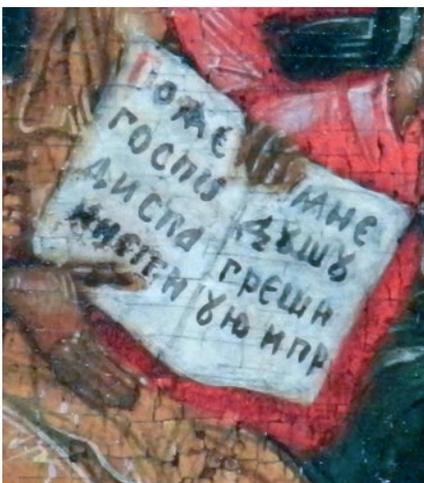
*Bozhe Gospodi spasi mne dushu greshnuyu i pr...*  
(My God, save my sinful soul)

In the hands of other figures:

3. *[V]em B[o]zhe yako sud bozh[iy] est', pok[ay]t[esya]*  
(I know, My God, that your Judgment is necessary to all people. Confess.)

4. *ne [zakosne] kosa gospodinu moyemu* (The scythe of my Lord will not slow down);

7. *den', egda sudit Bog taynaya* (The day, when God will judge all human affairs);



9 Detail of prayer held by Simon the Zealot

8 Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?" (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

9 "Akafist umilitel'ny Gospodu Iisusu Christu, Praiedneishemu Sudii i nashemu Mzdovozdaiatel'iu, v pamyat' vseobshhego Voskreseniia i Strashnogo Suda" (The very touching Akafist to Lord Jesus Christ, to the one the Most Just and our Avenger, in memory of general resurrection and Last Judgment), (<http://www.vernost.ru/akafist.htm>).

11. *Elitsy bo dukhom bozhiim vodiatsia, sii [synove bozhii]...*

(For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God) (Rom. 8:14).

Behind the apostles half-turned toward Christ stands a large number of angels. Behind the first, second and third row of angels appear the halos of yet greater numbers of angels of different ranks (cherubim, seraphim and others) producing the effect of an entire army; these celestial forces are present everywhere in this and other parts of the icon.<sup>10</sup> The last angel in the first row to the left, whose head is turned away from the center, greets and crowns the ascending monks who are to take their place in the "Heavenly hierarchy."

The angels' mission is broad. It includes serving and glorifying God, protecting the world from the forces of evil, protecting all living creatures while alive in this world, and at Judgment Day, awakening of the dead, and summoning the world to the Last Judgment.<sup>11</sup>

Above Christ in Judgment we also see a bright red six-winged seraph, with two darkly-colored cherubim at his side. Seraphim, who are representatives of the divine flame, are generally painted in red or dark orange colors, whereas cherubim, who embody divine wisdom, are painted in dark blue-green to emphasize the inscrutability of celestial wisdom, "the divine darkness." According to church legend, cherubim and seraphim cannot be perceived or contemplated by human beings, as opposed to angels and archangels who make frequent apparitions in our world.

In the upper tier of the icon, the sky, shaped like a scroll rolled up by the angels, is depicted above the cherubim. At the corners of the sky are the sun and the moon. Above the scroll on the margins of the icon there is a handwritten inscription (Figure 10): "Nebo yako khartiya sviyetsia" (The sky will be rolled as a scroll).

This story is based on Revelation 6:14: "And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together," as well as on the prophecies of Christ in the Gospel according to Matthew 24:29. Above this inscription is written: *Vtoroye prishestiye Gospoda Boga i Spasa nashego Iisusa Khrista* (The second coming of Lord Jesus Christ).

## Heavenly Jerusalem and the Enclosed Garden

To the left of the cherubim in the uppermost tier of the icon the inhabitants of Heavenly Jerusalem are seated behind a long table set for a feast (Figure 11). They represent a recombination of the images of the saints inhabiting the "Divine City." Generally, these are canonized bishops, apostles and prophets, according to a description of Heavenly Jerusalem in the *Life of Vasily the New*, the most important literary source determining many compositional elements of the Last Judgment.<sup>12</sup> Going from the center toward the right, behind the apostles, are two prophets, recognizable from their headdresses with red tassels, then three canonized bishops, then another prophet and

10 There are four great archangels – Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel, who, compared to the other angels, are most often presented in Last Judgment icons. They have a special eschatological mission – to summon the dead with a trumpet for the Last Judgment.

11 See Lev Livshits, V.D. Sarabianov, and T.Ia. Tsarevskaia, *Monumental'naia zhivopis' Velikogo Novgoroda. Konets XI – pervaya chetvert' XII veka*. (St. Petersburg, 2004), 93.

12 See Sergei Vilinskii, *Zhitie sviatogo Vasiliia Novogo v russkoi literature. Ch. II* (Odessa, 1911), 943.



10 Inscription: The sky will be rolled as a scroll.



11 Heavenly feast

next to him two tsars and a warrior. In the background stands one of the virtuous wives, a frequent character in Orthodox tradition.

The saints entering Heavenly Jerusalem include those who have already entered the Kingdom of God and are celebrating victory over evil. To the left of the saints are structures representing Heavenly Jerusalem; above them in the margins of the icon an inscription reads (Figure 12): *vsi sviatii nachnut veselitisia i likovati s rozhdshyeyu Khrista i s angely sviatymi* (All saints will start rejoicing and celebrate the birth of Christ along with the saintly angels).

The final triumph of the righteous in the Heavenly Kingdom, a standard element in depictions of the Last Judgment, including here, is described in Revelation 6:11, and in greater detail in Revelation 21. In 16th- and 17th-century Russian compositions, Heavenly Jerusalem is sometimes depicted by living quarters and feasts prepared for saints of different ranks, in accordance with their description in the *Life of Vasily the New*.<sup>13</sup>



12 The Mother of God

To the left of the images of saints inhabiting Heavenly Jerusalem, the Mother of God is depicted inside a red circle (Figure 13), sitting on an ochre-colored throne with a semicircular back. Her hands are crossed over her breast and her feet placed on a footrest. Flanking the throne and leaning toward her are two angels, dressed like deacons in white robes; they stand in front of the Mother of God with their arms folded to receive a benediction. Against the red background, one can trace the vague contours of a small three-leaved tree that is a frequent occurrence in this type of icon.

In Orthodox iconography, the "Circle of Paradise," presented with the Mother of God in the center, is called the "Enclosed Garden" (*Vertograd zakliuchennyi*) because the Mother of God, according to the church service of the Great Akafist (a special chant dedicated to her glorification) is herself that blessed garden, at once circumscribed and open. This iconography also exists in the Western European tradition, named the *Hortus Conclusus* (edit addition KdR). That it is placed in the uppermost register along with Heavenly Jerusalem is a detail typical of post-17th-century icons of the Last Judgment.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the 17th century, the garden was depicted in the lower part of icons alongside Abraham's Bosom. What is unusual in this icon is that the image of the Mother of God in the *Vertograd* is juxtaposed with an image of six or seven arrows, from which the Mother of God appears to be trying to protect her chest with the crossed-arm position.<sup>15</sup>

The garden story bears directly on the Last Judgment because the Mother of God, by virtue of her role in the Passion of Christ, is endowed with a special function: she participates in the salvation of humankind by tirelessly appealing to her Son, Christ, on behalf of the sinful human race. This is the most profound meaning of *Deesis*. But the main idea of the encircled

13 "Pervaia redaktsiia zhitiia Vasiliia Novogo iz Minei Chetii Mitropolita Makarii za mart, 26 den'," in Vilinskii, *Zhitie*, 435, 943.

14 Mariia Davidova, "Ikony 'Strashnogo suda' XVI-XVII vv. Prostranstvo khudozhestvennogo teksta," in Portal-Slovo [<http://www.portal-slovo.ru/art/35909.php>].

15 The arrows theme is known as "The Mother of God of the Seven-Arrows" or "The Softener of Evil Hearts." It is also known as "Simeon's prophecy," because it illustrates the famous words of the prophet Simeon. When, in accordance with the Old Testament requirements, the infant Christ was brought by his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem on the fortieth day after his birth, he was met by Simeon, who prophesied to the Mother of God: "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:35). In the same way as Christ was to be pierced by nails and spears, the soul of the Mother of God was to be pierced with sorrow and heartache when she saw the sufferings of her Son. See Irina Yazikova, *Obraz Bogoroditsi v russkoi ikonographii* (Moscow, 2003) and Nataliia Dmitrieva, *O tebe raduetsia. Chudotvornie ikony Bozhiei Materi* (Moscow, 2004).

*Vertograd* is that the Mother of God, who is responsible for God's incarnation as a human being, takes part in the rejoicing of the saints in Heavenly Jerusalem. Therefore, the combination of the Mother of God, who made possible the incarnation of God, with the angels dressed like deacons, represents the moment of the liturgy when Christ gives mystical communion to the saints of Heavenly Jerusalem.

### The Lower Section of Paradise

Heavenly Jerusalem is not the only place on the icon which depicts Paradise. Those who have gained access to Paradise are placed slightly below the center of the icon, toward the left, alongside three of the patriarchs seated in a circle (Figure 14): Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (thus constituting Abraham's Bosom).<sup>16</sup> Abraham's Bosom and the Enclosed Garden are crucial symbols in the representation of Paradise; beginning in the 17th century it became standard form to represent both elements in Last Judgment icons. This is the case also in this icon, where between Abraham's Bosom and the Enclosed Garden appears the image of the "Edenic corridor," a group of monks ascending to heaven in order to increase the ranks of the angels. To emphasize the relevance to eternal life of Abraham's Bosom and of the Enclosed Garden, they are represented either together inside a single circle, or in separate circles, occupying their own independent space, as in this icon.

Above the heads of the Abraham's Bosom group, are the trees of Heaven; in the background beyond them are the many souls of the righteous, represented as "Christian Infants." The image of infants is used in Christian symbolism to highlight the purity of the soul in accordance with Jesus' call to be as a child: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3-4).<sup>17</sup>

The fact that Abraham's Bosom is depicted below and not above Heavenly Jerusalem reflects not only an iconographic decision but also church teaching on the concept of *pliom* (the "Completeness of the Church"), according to which the righteous who have died and gone to the next world enjoy the pleasures of Paradise only partially. Such a view derives from the apocalyptic notion that a certain number of the righteous were required to "serve" in Heaven prior to the Last Judgment (Rev. 6:11), as recorded in the commentaries of the Holy Fathers. The main point of this idea is that, according to early Christian apologists, the Last Judgment will take place only once the Church has been completely constituted,<sup>18</sup> i.e. when all eligible members have entered the Church and their number has reached its maximum. Once all of the righteous have entered Paradise, they will enjoy the pleasures of Eden to the fullest degree. In the context of this teaching, the question arises as to whether one should consider

16 For more detail about the image of Abraham's Bosom see Vladimir Sarabianov, "Programmnye osnovy drevnerusskoi khramovoi dekoratsii vtoroi polovini 12 veka," in *Voprosy iskusstvoznaniia*. № 4 (Moscow, 1994).

17 The depiction of souls of the righteous in the shape of infants has a literary source as well. In *Vasily the New* we are told: "And we have reached Abraham's Bosom and have seen that it did not grow old and has been filled with Glory. There were many chambers in an inner world... In them there were many Christian infants, as many as have been born, and they very much exult, enjoying of bath of life after being cleansed from calamities, staying close to Abraham, Isaac, and James." See "Pervaia redaktsiia..." in Vilinsky, *Zhitie*, 432-33.

18 *Rannie ottsy Tserkvi. Antologiya* (Brussels, 1998), 162.



13 Inscription: All saints will rejoice and celebrate the birth of Christ along with the saintly angels

Abraham's Bosom a specific moment and location of the afterlife intended for the souls of the righteous before the Last Judgment or whether this is just a symbolic image of Paradise with no special function. Heated debates on this theme continued in the polemical church literature of the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Abraham's Bosom began to be regarded not as Paradise, but as an image of a preliminary Paradise in which the righteous may anticipate heavenly joys,<sup>20</sup> as reflected in the iconography. In all likelihood, this is why the episode of the Enclosed Garden, as a story of special significance about the Mother of God and her many divine powers, has been separated from Abraham's Bosom and raised up higher to Heavenly Jerusalem. Thus, this icon, in a nod to old Christian tradition, makes the Enclosed Garden an integral part of Paradise with Abraham's Bosom below, leaving open the question of the status of the departed souls before the Last Judgment.

To the right of Abraham's Bosom there is an image of a door into Paradise, through which an angel is leading the righteous. Behind the angel walks the apostle Peter (the figure in yellow and blue garb), holding the keys to Heavenly Jerusalem and leading the procession of the righteous. The image of Peter, upon whom, according to the Gospel, Christ bestowed the power to absolve sins as the leader of the righteous, is meant to emphasize the centrality of the Church and of the priesthood in the leadership of the people of God into the Heavenly Kingdom.

Thus, in contrast to the image of Heavenly Jerusalem (including the righteous rejoicing at the feast in the upper tier of the Enclosed Garden), "lower" Paradise in many ways reflects the state of anticipation of the moment of entry of the fortunate into the gardens of Paradise. The depiction of the gate into heaven is also not without symbolic meaning, referring back to the words of Christ: "I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture." (John 10:9).

### **New Testament Trinity and Representation of Archangel Michael**

To the left of the scroll, there is an image of the New Testament Trinity (Figure 15): to the right is God the Father with his hand raised in a gesture of blessing, to the left God the Son, and at the top of the circle the Holy Spirit, depicted as a dove. This representation of the New Testament Trinity represents the theological doctrine of the divine plan of creation, according to which, Jesus' coming to earth, His Passion and Resurrection, which opened the path to salvation for all creatures on earth, have been predetermined from the very beginning by a single decision of all three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Everything is predetermined, including the end of time, the transfiguration of the world, the second coming of Christ, his enthronement, and his Judgment of all earthly creatures.<sup>21</sup> The image of the New Testament Trinity thus points to the inevitability of the Last Judgment and emphasizes the unity in essence of Christ and God the Father, which was an urgent task at a time of struggles amongst variously heretical sects,

19 Abraham's Bosom was also considered the locus of an intermediate Paradise for the Old Testament righteous who died before Christ.

20 The theological basis for the opinion that the pleasures of Paradise for the Old Testament righteous became possible only during the New Testament time, according to the Church doctrine, is found in the words of the epistle of Paul to Hebrews: "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39-40).

21 Similar ideas became popular in Russian church art in the epoch of Ivan the Terrible. For more detail see Livon Nersesian, "Videnie proroka Daniila," in *Pravoslavnoe obrazovanie* ([http://www.orthedu.ru/ch\\_hist/hi\\_rpz/57451%20n.htm](http://www.orthedu.ru/ch_hist/hi_rpz/57451%20n.htm)).



14 The Bosom of Abraham --Abraham, Isaac and Jacob--seated at the Edenic corridor

such as the *strigolniki* and the Judaizing *zhidovstvuiushchie*, whose representatives renounced the Holy Trinity and the divine status of Christ.<sup>22</sup> From the point of view of church canons, the depiction of God the Father might seem surprising. Indeed, during the “Hundred Chapter Synod” held in Moscow in 1551 (the *Stoglavyi Sobor*), it was forbidden to depict God the Father. His image, as a gray-bearded elder in the composition of the Trinity, probably emerged as an effort to establish in the minds of the believers the conjoining of God the Father and God the Son as a unified essence, the logic being that, if they are of one essence they must be depicted in the same way, either both in the flesh or both, somehow, abstractly.

To the right of the New Testament Trinity the story of “The Gathering of the Archangel Michael and Other Fleshless Celestial Forces” is represented; this story has a corresponding inscription slightly above, against the margin of the icon, and is depicted in a fairly traditional way. Angels praising Christ hold the image of the Savior Emmanuel<sup>23</sup> in front of them inside a circle or halo (such a presentation has been common in Russia since the end of the 14th century). Such a unique presentation of Christ by the angels was first prompted in Byzantium by the need to establish the idea of veneration for icons after the victory over the Iconoclasts in 843: the meaning here is that even the angels, in spite of their invisibility and insubstantiality, hold a concrete image of Emmanuel, demonstrating their reverence toward icons and affirming the legitimacy of depicting a Christ who came to earth in flesh and blood. In this icon, this idea is shown on a reduced scale; it is more typical that there be a larger group of angels with a medallion of Emmanuel supported by Michael and Gabriel, the two archangels in front. These are in all likelihood the two angels represented.

On this icon, Michael is represented several times; below the Assembly scene, he is depicted again in full stature, overthrowing Satan and the angels of the dark (the devils) from Heaven.<sup>24</sup> The presence of Michael in Last Judgment icons may be explained by the Bible endowing him with an apocalyptic mission and by his popularity among the peasant laity and in folk Russian culture. It is notable that in his own individual icon Michael could even be placed within the Deesis tier in place of John the Baptist; he could also tip the scales and thus decide the destiny of individual souls at the Last Judgment. Last Judgment icons represent the Archangel Michael because, according to Orthodox Church teachings, all the powers of Heaven will gather at the moment of the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment, “when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him...” (Matt. 25:31). The feast of the “The Gathering of the Archangel Michael and Other Fleshless Celestial Forces” is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on November 8 according to the Julian calendar (November 19, new style).

### The Throne Prepared (The Etimasia)

Below Christ the Judge, inside a red circle with the Cross, the instrument of crucifixion, there is a large trapezoidal table with four decorated legs (Figure 16). The table so depicted is actually square and would be perceived as

22 They also refused monasticism and ecclesiastic hierarchy and proclaimed individualism in faith and matters of salvation, highly unacceptable in the context of Moscow Grand-Duchy ideology and the autocratic political system of Muscovite Russia.

23 The iconographic story “Spas Emmanuel,” in which Christ is represented as an adolescent, symbolizes the eternal youth of Christ, His eternity, His immunity to any change, as well as His *a priori* eternal existence before the creation of the world.

24 See Ivan Benchev, *Ikony angelov. Obrazy nebesnikh poslannikov* (Moscow, 2005), 25, 118.



15 New Testament Trinity (center), with a gathering of angels (right)

such by an 18th-century believer; the trapezoidal shape is the result of the “reverse perspective” typical of many early icons. If the trapezoid were reversed, with the shorter line above the longer, a 21st-century viewer would also perceive the table as square even though the actual shape is a trapezoid. This is the “Throne Prepared” (the *Etimasia*) the symbol of God’s presence. The *Etimasia*, along with the depiction of the Cross, forms the compositional center of the icon. The Throne Prepared symbolizes all in one image Christ’s Golgotha, his Resurrection, and the Second Coming on the day of the Last Judgment. A story from the Apocrypha about how, after the ascent of Christ, the Apostles saved a special throne for Him upon which they placed the bread of the Eucharist, forms the basis of the tradition for such a representation.<sup>25</sup> The *Etimasia*, when used as an element of Last Judgment icons, also carries legal significance. Such an interpretation is recorded in historical church tradition; for example, during the Ecumenical Church Councils, the debates among bishops took place around a throne upon which was placed the Gospel. In the Last Judgment, the throne is not just the symbol of Christ in general, but specifically the symbol of Christ in his role as the Judge who has exclusive power over the world, according to the vision of John the Theologian, who saw that “...a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on that throne” (Rev. 4:2).<sup>26</sup>



16 Trapezoidal table of the Throne Prepared

In the case of this icon, only the image of the cross accompanies the depiction of the *Etimasia* (other attributes of the Passion in Last Judgment icons sometimes include Christ’s clothing and other instruments of his Passion). Next to the cross an angel is turned toward the righteous, recognizable from their haloes and poised to receive a positive verdict from God, with admittance to eternal life. As they approach the “Throne Prepared,” the righteous fold their arms across their chests in the gesture proper to Orthodox Christians as they prepare to receive a blessing.

### The Condemned: Outcast Nations and Social Elements

To the left of the *Etimasia*, angels are depicted throwing sinners into Hell with a three-pronged weapon. These sinners consist mainly of foreign infidels, who, according to Last Judgment theology, are consigned to the torments of Hell for not having followed the Orthodox faith. These groups are called the “outcast nations” and are a fairly standard element in Last Judgment icons. Among these outcast nations, reflecting widespread medieval anti-Semitism, the Jews are especially singled out, heading the entire group. Above and to the left of the Jews, the Prophet Moses points to the Cross and to Christ the Judge of the Jews in an energetic upward motion of his right arm. Moses himself faces us directly as his body simultaneously moves in two opposite directions (Figure 17): he steps toward and at the same time turns away from the Jews who are dressed in red clothing (as the worst offenders, they stand foremost among “the nations” in their white headdresses) whom he condemns for rejecting Christ. This depiction is a Byzantine interpretation of the words of Christ which blame the Jews as those who have rejected Him: “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust” (John 5:45). The Byzantine elaboration on the story, which is the version

25 V. Zalesskaia, “Prestol ugotovannyi i templon (o simbolike trona v liturgii),” in *Iskusstvo khristianskogo mira. Sbornik statij. Vypusk 7* (Moscow, 2003), 273. For more details about the *Etimasia* see also T.H. v. Bogyay, “Zur Geschichte der *Etimasia*” in *Congrès internationale des études byzantines*, 2 (Munich, 1956), 58-61.

26 Zalesskaia, 273.



17 Moses and the outcast nations

given in most Last Judgment icons, tells how the Jews will try to justify themselves during the Last Judgment for their rejection of Christ. According to the scene from the *Life of Vasily the New*, the Jews will try to explain that they rejected Christ in order to remain faithful to the Law of Moses. Having seen him, the Jews recognize him at once and exclaim: "O, Moses, you gave us the Commandments. We will abide by this Law, given by you," to which Moses replies: "O, silly and callous in your heart are you, who are not the sons of Abraham but of the devil himself. Didn't I write in my Law to you thus: 'The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.'"<sup>27</sup> Moses thus refers to his own words in Deuteronomy 18:15, which in Orthodox exegetic tradition are interpreted as a sign of Christ's impending arrival. An inscription, probably corresponding to this story, is placed near the figure of Moses in the icon, but it is not entirely clear.

Among the infidels in the second tier above the Jews one can also identify a Muslim, a person with an apparently Arab face wearing an oriental hat with drooping dark-green fabric. To his right is depicted a group, with the inscription "rusy" (the Rus) above it, referring to the population of Ancient Russia before it adopted Christianity in 988. Further to the right are Oriental faces with ruffled hair, dressed in exotic hats with round pompons on top, above which one can read a barely legible inscription "turki" (the Turks). Below them, in the middle, wearing bizarre, oversized hats are people dressed in the typical Russian representation of European clothes. They were all condemned to life in Hell for their lack of faith in Christ and their practice of "untrue faith." It is probably not accidental that these peoples were also political adversaries of Russia.

One tier below the outcast nations, Russian Orthodox people are depicted (Figure 18), not as symbols of a nation doomed to perish but as hapless representatives of different Russian social groups condemned for not upholding the commandments and living righteously despite their nominal adherence to the Orthodox faith. The large number of monks burning in Hell testifies to the special responsibility with which they, as a group, are entrusted by Russian society: monks, collectively called in the Church "the angelic order," are responsible for organizing the life of the Church; they are supposed to be the leaders of the spiritual life of society, so that monks who do not live up to their angelic status are liable to the harshest scorn and must be punished, according to the customary view, above and beyond the rest of the population. This group also includes people of aristocratic birth, many wives, as well as a number of bishops who governed in violation of the rules of the Holy Fathers. There is even a tsar, which attests to the fact that absolutely everyone, the rich and the poor, the noble and the obscure, is subject to judgment.

The outcast nations, as well as the Orthodox who did not live righteously, stand by a fiery stream, an image borrowed from the Prophet Daniel. This river of fire was also known all over Russia from the *Passion of the Mother of God*, one of the most popular texts in church literature in ancient Russia. From the beginning of the 12th century, this *Passion* states that: "the river

<sup>27</sup> See *Strashnyi Sud Bozhi. Videnie Grigoriia, uchenika sviatogo i bogonosnogo ottsa nashego Vasiliia Novogo Tsaregradskogo* (Moscow, 1995), 58. This element is found in Moldavian and Valach icons. There are compositions where "the outcast people" consist only of Jews condemned by Moses, in particular, on Serbian and Bulgarian icons. This motif in Last Judgment iconography is examined by the Canadian scholar J. P. Himka. See J.-P. Himka, *On the Left Hand of God: "Peoples" in Ukrainian Icons of the Last Judgment* (forthcoming).



18 Unfaithful Russian Orthodox people

contains many husbands and wives: some are submerged up to their waists, others up to their chests, and still others up to their necks," depending on the degree of their guilt.<sup>28</sup>

### Individual Judgment and the "Serpent of Tribulations"

One tier below the *Etimasia* there is a large hand, the "hand of God," out of which the souls of the righteous, represented as infants, are peering. This image refers to the Apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon*: "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment shall ever touch them" (Wisd. of Sol. 3:1).

The "hand of God" holds a scale, the "measurer of human deeds," and nearby, angels fight with devils for a human soul, depicted between the pans of scale as a youth (Figure 19), naked because at the moment of the Last Judgment nothing earthly can protect him, neither his wealth, nor his friends, only the good deeds performed during his lifetime.<sup>29</sup> To the right of the scale, the devil is placing a list of sins upon it and trying to tip it to his side. But the angel to the left of the scale is laying a white handkerchief onto it, possibly an allusion to a fragment from the story of the sufferings of the righteous Feodora (from the *Life of Vasily the New*), who was tortured by devils for twenty sins. In the last stage of her torments, the devil alleges one last "grave" sin to condemn Feodora to Hell, but an angel places on the scale a white handkerchief, which she had once given to a beggar as alms, and this handkerchief ultimately tips the scale to the side of Heaven.

The naked youth symbolizing the individual undergoing the Last Judgment stands on one of the coils of the giant "Serpent of Tribulations," a required image in Last Judgment icons. From the mouth of the "apocalyptic beast," upon whom Satan is seated in Hell, the serpent rises up in heavy curves; its head comes very close to the figure of a naked man. To the serpent's body are attached a series of circles, on each of which is written the name of one of the potential sins with which the court may indict the deceased. These circles (Figure 20) represent the tribulations or "toll-houses," a series of gateways through which a soul must pass on its way to judgment. The sins are placed in order of increasing gravity, with the least serious located far from the mouth of the Hell and the more damning ones closest to Hell.



19 Hand of God with scale and youth

28 The image of "the fiery river" burning sinners was popular until the 16th century. "The Fiery River" served also as the fence of Paradise. A historian of religious art theorizes that in the 16th century the "River of Fire" began to disappear gradually in the Last Judgment icons and finally was replaced by the "Serpent of Tribulations." See Nikolai Pokrovskii, *Strashnyi Sud v pamiatnikakh vizantiiskogo i russkogo iskusstva* (Odessa, 1887), 369, 371. But this theory cannot be correct, as the "River of Fire" and the "Serpent of Tribulations" are not interchangeable. Indeed, many icons show both depicted simultaneously, testifying to their different functions.

29 A similar image of the naked human figure personifying the soul of a defendant in the Last Judgment can be found not only in Last Judgment iconography, but also in miniatures, as well as in icon or fresco illustrations of the Psalm 118 which is usually recited during orthodox funeral services (such as those in the 14th-century Gregorian church of Sofia in Ochrid). This image may also refer to the chant "Canon on the Departure of the Soul from the Body" illustrating the Homily of Cyril of Alexandria. Also, the early 13th century murals in the refectory of the monastery of John the Theologian on the island of Patmos isle represent the themes of the death of a righteous person and the death of a sinner. In addition the illustrated "Canon on the Departure of the Soul from the Body" is found in the prayer-book illuminations such as the twelfth century miniature in the Psalter from the Dionisiat monastery. This scene continued to spread during the late Byzantine period, becoming popular in ancient Russian art. For further detail see L. Livshits et al, *Monumental'naia zhivopis'*.



20 Detail of serpents "toll-houses"

Devils flit around the rings, presenting accusations both true and false, while angels attempt to protect the sinner.<sup>30</sup>

The image of the serpent (Figure 4) is variously interpreted by different experts, as the seducer who brought humankind to its fall through Adam and Eve (Ya. Klozinskaya); as the embodiment of evil itself; as a "worm" (V. Lakata, B. Brenk, G. Skrobukh); or, according to Goldfrank, as the Antichrist. Goldfrank relates the appearance of the "Serpent of Tribulations" in 15th-century icons to the growth of eschatological views and to the struggle against the *strigolniki* heretics, who were compared to the deadly serpent and to the forerunners of the Antichrist.<sup>31</sup>

V.K. Tsodikovich provides an original explanation of the connection between the serpent and the tribulation story. Appealing to ancient Russian pagan beliefs popular at the time, he thinks that the "Serpent of Tribulations" has a purifying effect: that through torture, the soul is not undergoing a test as to whether it should be condemned or saved, but rather is being cleansed. If its sins do not weigh too heavily, it will eventually be spit out by the serpent in a state of purity that qualifies it for the joys of Paradise.<sup>32</sup> However, many contemporary experts, in particular A.I. Alekseev, L.V. Neresian, and L.A. Berezhnaia, disagree with this interpretation and its assumption with regard to the inclusion of pagan motifs in Last Judgment iconography.<sup>33</sup>

According to Livon Neresian, the key to the interpretation of the "Serpent of Tribulations" is the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve "because it was the Fall that engendered the many types of sins for which the soul is tested after death. A series of tests-tortures was quite naturally associated with the serpent of temptations, the progenitor of all evil." In addition, he states, the Biblical condemnation of the serpent was traditionally interpreted as a prophecy of victory over evil and death which were introduced into the world by the Fall. Thus, the serpent is meant as a reminder of the impending overthrow of the Antichrist preceding the Second Coming and the universal Judgment, which is the main theme of the composition as a whole.<sup>34</sup>

## Hell

This icon is standard in its depiction of Hell. On the left side, different kinds of tortures are depicted beneath "the Serpent of Tribulations," arranged into nine subdivisions. Along the right edge of the middle part of the icon we see

30 The tribulations were seen as a provisional, not a final, judgment of each individual, occurring after their death. According to widespread church opinion, they precede the Last Judgment. Each tribulation, or toll-house, evaluates whether the soul engaged in the corresponding sin. If its sins outweigh its good actions, the soul will be cast into Hell, but the final decision of individual destiny will be made during the Last Judgment. See Sergei Vilinskii, *Zhitie sviatogo Vasiliia Novogo. Chast' I. Issledovaniia* (Moscow, 1916), 33-34.

31 For more detail on the symbolic image of «the Snake of toll-houses» see Livon Neresian. "Voznesenie monakhov i padenie angelov. Ob odnom ikonographicheskom motive v russkikh ikonakh "Strashnogo Suda" XVI veka," in *Iskusstvoznanie*, № 2 (Moscow, 1998), 262-70; L.A. Berezhnaia, "'Odesnuuu' i 'oshuiuuu': Russkie i rusnskie pravoslavnie ikony "Strashnogo Suda" na rubezhe epokh," in *Chelovek v "iskusnykh" prostranstvakh: ikona, teatral'nie podmostki, gorodskoi landshaft* (Moscow, 2003), 457-58; D.M. Goldfrank "Who put the Snake on the Icon and the Tollbooths on the Snake? A Problem of Last Judgment Iconography," in *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 19 (Cambridge, 1995), 195-96.

32 This opinion is expounded in extensive research by Tsodikovich in his *Semantika ikonografii "Strashnogo..."*, cited above.

33 Aleksei Alekseev, "Siuzhet 'zmeia mitarstv' v kompozitsii russkikh ikon 'Strashnogo Suda,'" in *Tserkovnaia arkheologiia, vipusk 4* (St. Petersburg, 1998), 16.

34 See Livon Neresian, "O nekotorykh istochnikakh russkoi ikonografii 'Strashnogo Suda' XV-XVI vekov," in *Materialy Fedoro-Davidovskikh chtenii* (Moscow, 2000)

fallen angels, cast down by Archangel Michael and plummeting into Hell, which is represented as a space engulfed in flames, where the fallen angels will reside. The central figures consist of an apocalyptic beast upon which Satan is seated (Figure 21); and the inscription in the margin of the icon reads: *Vverzhen satana vo ogn' negasim so aggely ego* ("Satan and his angels are thrown down into the inextinguishable fire"), the prophecy to be realized in the Last Judgment according to Revelation 20:7-10. In addition, symbolic images of tortures in Hell include the following:

*ubiysam [muka] [s]k[rezh]et zubniy*  
(for murderers, torture by gnashing of teeth)

*nemiloserdym i nemilostivym muka mraz, studen' i led veliy*  
(for the unmerciful and the stingy, torture by frost, freezing and great icy cold)

*srebroliubtsam – cherv' neusypayushiy*  
(for the money-loving, an indefatigable worm)

*tatyam strakh neprestanny* (for thieves, constant fear)

*razboynikom groza neis[po...]* (for robbers, a thunderstorm)

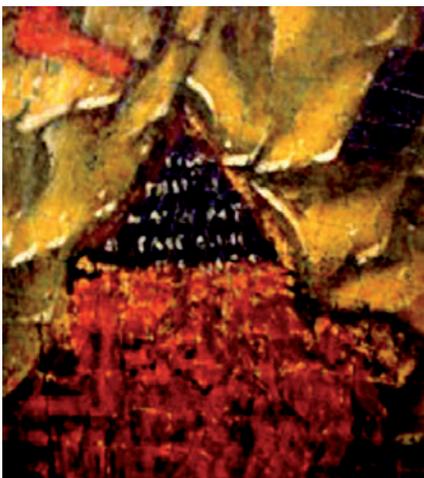
*bludnikom muka ogn' vechny* (for fornicators, eternal fire)



21 Satan riding on an Apocalyptic beast

To a Western audience it may appear that the gravest sins receive very light punishment, whereas fornicators are more severely punished ("gnashing of teeth" for murderers, "thunderstorms" for robbers versus "eternal fire" for fornicators). It must be noted, however, that for a Russian audience of those times, these punishments were considered equally dreadful.

It is also interesting to compare the tortures listed above to those itemized in the Byzantine text *The Word of Palladius of Mnichos about the Second Coming* which is another basic source for most of the Last Judgment icons. According to Palladius Mnichos (c. 363-430?), torments are distributed as follows: "boiling pitch for drunkards, fire for fornicators, an inexhaustible worm for money-grubbing persons, gnashing of teeth for magicians, frost for the ungenerous, fear for thieves." These torments, with the exception of the gnashing of teeth which in the *Word of Palladius* is intended for magicians, correspond to those in this icon.<sup>35</sup>



22 Facial features in a mass of red color

This type of subdivision into sections is a standard feature of Last Judgment icons. This icon, however, contains a unique feature: a special category of punishment reserved for drunkards (Figure 22), which is located to the left of the scene in which the fornicators are being pilloried: it represents a cave where drunkards are undergoing the punishment of boiling pitch.

On this fragment facial features may be discerned in the mass of red color. The words above read: *piyanitsam mrak i smola kipiashchaya* (For drunkards, darkness and boiling pitch).

Interestingly, the drunkards are situated further away from the main magma of Hell, even further away than the pilloried fornicator. That, in addition to the bright red color which emphasizes them, can be interpreted as a sign of the special indulgence which Russia shows to its drunkards. It indicates that although ultimately drunkards had to be sent to Hell, Russians at some level felt sorry for them and regretted having to punish their alcoholics so harshly. Could it be that late 17th-century Russians had already grasped the notion

<sup>35</sup> Pokrovskii, 92.



23 The Kindly Adulterer

that alcoholism is an illness and not a sin? In any case, this detail testifies to the age-old problem of drunkenness in Russian society. It was condemned by the Church in the peasantry and even more so among the merchant class, which patronized the construction of churches in the Volga region, where this icon originated.

### The “Kindly Adulterer”

In an image unfamiliar to many Western viewers, next to the “Serpent of Tribulations,” exactly in the central axis of the icon, the “Kindly Adulterer” (also translated as the “Generous Fornicator”) is represented as a naked person tied to a pillar of shame (Figure 23). Such adulterers are the beneficiaries of an exception to the punishment usually meted out to sinners in their category: because they have been charitable during their lifetime, they are receiving a lighter sentence. Excused from the “eternal fire” penalty, they are now being held in a special place. To the left of the “Kindly Adulterer” is an angel bearing a scroll with an inscription which details the lighter penalty: the sinner depicted was a wealthy man who had relaxed sexual mores but was generous with his alms, so although he is deprived of Paradise, he is spared the tortures of Hell, and is thus shown placed between Hell and Paradise (Figure 24).

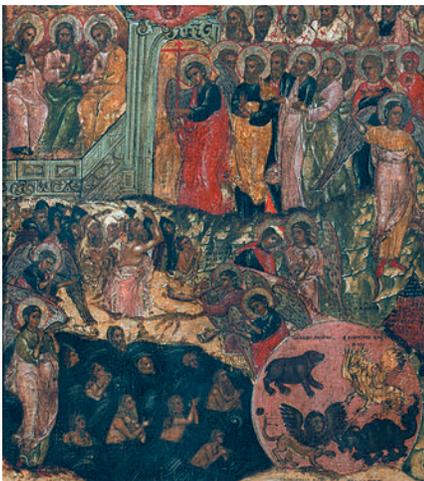


24 Penalty for the Kindly Adulterer

*reche milo[s]tyni radi izbavlen esi muki a bluda r[adi lishen esi raya]*  
 (For the sake of alms you are relieved of torments, but because of fornication are deprived as well of Paradise)

The figure of the “Kindly Adulterer” is typical of Russian icons of the Last Judgment. The sources of this image are once again to be found in the *Life of Vasily the New* where a monk, Grigorii, prays to God for a reduced sentence for certain types of sinners. In response, God makes provision for a special place for repentant sinners where they will not suffer the flames of Hell yet will be deprived of the joys of Paradise because of their sin of adultery. Interestingly, this folk image seems to contradict the official position of the Orthodox Church, which denies the existence of an interim space between Heaven and Heaven in the afterworld.<sup>36</sup>

### The Four Doomed Kingdoms



25 Prophet Daniel's vision of the four doomed kingdoms

In the lower right part of the composition, inside a pink circle (Figure 25), are the allegorical images of the four beasts who “came up from the sea,” symbolizing the four “doomed kingdoms” and illustrating the prophecy of Daniel, a standard item in Last Judgment icons (Dan. 7:3-8). The sea and the earth releasing the dead, as well as the four trumpeting angels from the scene of the resurrection of the dead, are themselves typically associated in the iconographic tradition with the four apocalyptic Angels “standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth” (Rev. 7:1) and with the four heavenly winds fighting each other on the great sea (Dan. 7:2).<sup>37</sup> The inscription corresponding to the story reads: *Angel Gospoden' pokazuyet Daniilu chetyre zveri* (“The angel shows four animals to the prophet Daniel”).

<sup>36</sup> Last Judgment scholars paid much attention to this contradiction. See Pokrovskii, 96; Berezhnaia, 459.

<sup>37</sup> Aleksander Saltikov, “Freska ‘More otdaet svoikh mertetsov’ v rospisiakh Uspenskogo Sobora vo Vladimire 1408 goda,” in *Iskusstvo khristianskogo mira. Sbornik statei*, 7 (Moscow, 2003), 13-28. Also Nersesian, “Videnie proroka....”

Inside the sphere are the following inscriptions: on the bear showing his teeth, *tsarstvo perskoye* (the Persian Kingdom); on the four-headed, four-winged leopard, *ellinskoye tsarstvo* (the Hellenic Kingdom); below the winged lion, *vavilonskoye tsarstvo* (the Babylonian Kingdom); below the creature with ten horns, *tsarstvo rimskoye* (the Roman Kingdom). These inscriptions with the names of the kingdoms are clear and well-preserved, except for the inscription under the winged lion. To the right of “the doomed kingdoms,” where the earth and the sea are releasing their dead, there is no personification of the sea and the earth. Four angels play trumpets at the four corners of the world as the dead are resurrected for the Last Judgment.

The association of these animals with specific kingdoms goes back to the most ancient interpretation of this story in the tradition of the Holy Fathers, as it was enunciated in the 3rd century by Hippolytus of Rome. The Kingdom of Rome, according to Hippolytus, was both the Kingdom of the Antichrist, and, more specifically, the Kingdom that gave rise to the Antichrist: “Ten horns will emerge from the mentioned Kingdom, when the time of this beast will come and the small horn who is Antichrist himself will suddenly appear among them; when the truth will perish on earth and the whole world will come to an end.”<sup>38</sup>

### The Text in the Lower Margin

An important and exceptional feature of this icon is the long inscription in its lower margin (Figure 26), which unfortunately was damaged in certain places and overwritten in others (which led to several spelling errors in the Old Church Slavonic). Although unevenly preserved, the remaining fragments allow us to match the inscription to the early 5th-century homily of Cyril of Alexandria *On the Departure of the Soul from the Body and the Second Coming*, in which a very developed and detailed opposition between “sinners” and “righteous persons” is provided. A fragment from Cyril's homily clearly indicates common phrases.

The icon reads:

*[Prav[ednii v rayu] vesel[yat]sya. A greshnii vo ogni negasimo[m]. . . Pravednii li[kuyut] a [g]r[eshnii] svyaz[uy]yemi byvayu[t]. Pravednii poyut[,] a greshnii plachut . . . Pra[vednii] [pokoyushchiyesya] v nedre avraamli . . . [..]kuyu (poyushche), a g[reshnii vo ade]. ... Pravednii v nedrakh Avraamli, a greshnii... udalikhomsia nashikh bezzakony... Pravednii v pokoye, a greshnii vo osuzhdenii. Pravednii prokhlazhdayutsia, a greshnii – paliatsia... Pravednii velichayutsia[,] a greshnii tayut]*

The phrases in bold below are in both the icon and the Cyril homily:

**The righteous rejoice in Heaven while the sinners burn in eternal flames.** The righteous enjoy themselves, the sinners suffer. **The righteous are jubilant, the sinners suffer in confinement.** The righteous sing, the sinners weep. The righteous chant the sacred chant, the

38 Ippolit Rimskii, “Tolkovaniia na knigu proroka Daniila,” in *Tvoreniia svatogo Ippolita Rimskogo, T. 1.* (Kazan', 1898), 114-15.



26 Text in lower margin: Upper cartouche is the left side, lower is the right.

sinners bear their miserable demise. **The righteous are seated in Abraham's Bosom, the sinners in the boiling waves of the Devil.** The righteous are calm, the sinners are perplexed. **The righteous refresh themselves, the sinners are singed by blazing fire. The righteous experience joy, the sinners dry up in bitter grief. The righteous become greater, the sinners decompose.**

Although the second half of the inscription departs from Cyril's homily, the presence of lines from Cyril's homily in this icon makes even more emphatic the basic Christian conception of one's personal responsibility for one's own spiritual fate and the necessity of resisting the temptations of public life.

## Conclusion

The many striking and evocative images in the Last Judgment icon present a clear, interesting, representative and comprehensive catalog of the complex theological concepts connected to the Last Judgment theme as they evolved during the 17th century. Its iconography exemplifies all the teachings of Russian Orthodox tradition and includes additional Bible-based subjects not found in standard Christian doctrine; for example, the representation of "Outcast Nations" argues that different peoples enjoy different degrees of access to salvation, and that some peoples, to the mind of 17th-century Russian society, are beyond salvation. There is also attention to the Russian social context, and some depictions show that the artist or artists who created the icon grappled with social questions, attempting to categorize sinners who were condemned by Russian society at that time. An example of such itemization is the group who sinned by excessive drinking, which, unusually, is depicted separately from other groups of sinners and, it is implied, are to be treated with more than the traditional level of mercy.

The list of sins on the "Serpent of Tribulations" also seems to put uncommon emphasis on sins such as denunciation, unjust condemnation, self-glorification, and self-love, sins which reflect insufficient respect for others as individuals and which, at the same time, clash with a populist, egalitarian strain in Russian thinking. These social implications are among this icon's main points of interest, and the artist made all these points while following the accepted rules of Last Judgment iconography. However, the icon is also interesting in that it presents exceptions to those rules. The text at the bottom of the icon is unique. It is not to be found on other Last Judgment icon, even though its source, the *Homily of Cyril*, is very popular in Greek and Russian Orthodox prayer books and compendia of sermons. This unexpected addition to the composition also emphasizes the icon's social implications.

This Last Judgment icon is a very beautiful rendering of the theme; it is both completely canonical and in its aesthetic properties on a par with well-known icons of the same topic in Russian museums. It is a triumph of the icon painter's art in that, while composed of so many separate images expressing so many powerful themes, it achieves a complex and harmonious whole. As the Yaroslavl artist or artists intended three hundred years ago, it conveys to the Orthodox believer, and to anyone sensitive to beauty, an unsettling and encouraging glimpse of divine justice in a world beyond our own.

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