J U S T I N   L .   W I L L S O N [a]

The *ho Ōn* (ὁ ὤν) Inscription in Christ's Halo[*]

with seven figures

ABSTRACT: The present study investigates the spread of the *ho Ōn* (ὁ ὤν) inscription in Christ's halo. Developed in the early Palaiologan period, the inscription originated with the liturgy for the Feast of the Transfiguration and was popularized through the theology of light elucidated by Hesychasts. Contextualizing the epigraphic innovation within the wider debates over Hesychast theology, this essay pursues lines of inquiry first proposed by Titos Papamastorakis, who drew attention to the proliferation of this inscription in dome ensembles. The study concludes by discussing the reception of the *ho Ōn* in the Post-Byzantine Greek and Slavic worlds.

KEYWORDS: Halo; Inscription; Tetragrammaton; Transfiguration; Hesychasm

INTRODUCTION

In a study of church dome decoration in late Byzantium Titos Papamastorakis drew attention to a little-noted inscription which began appearing in Christ's halo[1]. Found in many Palaiologan fresco cycles, one example can be seen on the Christ Pantocrator in the dome of the narthex at Lesnovo monastery, painted in 1349 (**Fig. 1**)[2]. Comprised of an *omicron*, *omega*, and *nu*, the inscription was written with the article (*omicron*) on the top bar of the incuse cross so that the participle (*omega-nu*) read from left to right across Christ's gaze[3]. Elsewhere, the *omicron* was written on the left so that the participle read in an arc over Christ's brow (**Fig. 2**)[4]. In rare cases, such as in Poggiardo, Italy, the article was placed at the top and the participle was written in mirror script, so that the name read from right to left across Christ's face[5].

This was the name that God signalled to Moses at the Burning Bush on Mount Horeb (Ex 3:14). Translating as 'the Being,' or 'the One who is,' this deeply philosophical name was an unusual choice for an icon label. Indeed, it was the unutterable name of God, which was referred to in

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[a] Justin Willson: Princeton University, Department of Art & Archaeology, 105 McCormick Hall, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544; jwillson@princeton.edu.

[1] T. PAPAMASTORAKIS, O diakosmos tu troulou tōn naōn tīs paleologeias periodou stī Valkanikī chersonīso kai tīn Kypro (*Vivliothīkī tīs en Athīnais Archaiologikīs Etaireias* 213). Athens 2001, 68–71.

[2] S. GABELIĆ, Manastir Lesnovo: istorija i slikarstvo. Belgrade 1998, 155, fig. 73.

[3] G. I. VZDORNOV, Volotovo: freski tserkvi Uspeniia na Volotovom pole bliz Novgoroda. Moscow 1989, cat. no. 18.

[4] See R. LANGE, Die Byzantinische Reliefikone. Recklinghausen 1964, cat. no. 17, who dates the icon to the Middle Byzantine period, but admits that his comparisons with the mosaics at Cefalù are imperfect. More recently, Ch. BAKIRTZIS, A Note on the History and Culture of Serres during the Late Byzantine Period, in: Ceramic Art from Byzantine Serres, ed. D. Papanikola-Bakirtzis – E. D. Maguire – H. Maguire. Urbana 1992, 36–41, fig. 39 has made a more convincing comparison with the output of fourteenth-century workshops in Serres.

[5] A. MEDEA, Gli affreschi delle cripte eremitiche pugliesi. Rome 1939, I 135–136, 140–141; II pls. 67, 74. Medea identifies the second title correctly but transcribes the first as "A-O-Ω" (136), likely due to the fresco's poor state of preservation.

Figure 1: Christ Pantocrator, 1349. Fresco. North Macedonia, Lesnovo Monastery (Photo courtesy of Miodrag Marković)

Figure 2: Christ Euergetes, 14th century. Marble, 93 × 116 cm. Serres, Church of the Saints Theodore (Photo courtesy of the Commercial Bank of Greece)
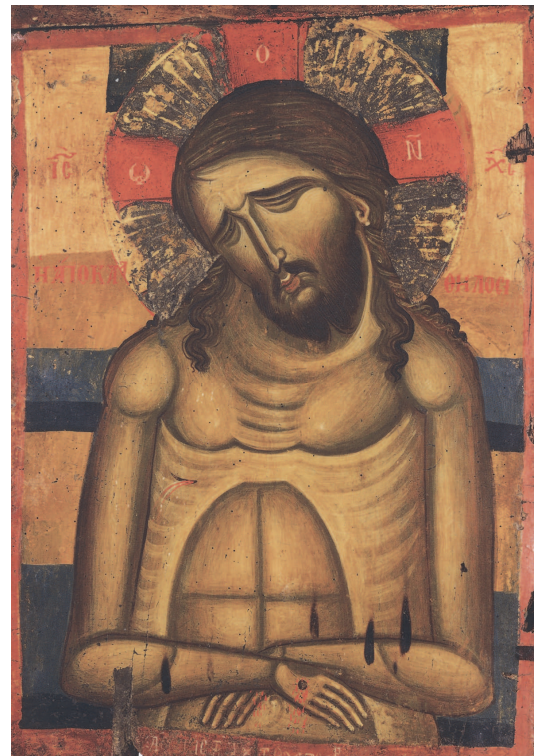

Figure 3: Man of Sorrows, late 13th century. Tempera on wood, 103.5 × 70.5 cm. Kastoria, Byzantine Museum (Photo after Tsigaridas, Eikones tou Vizantinou Mouseiou kai naōn tīs Kastorias. 2018, cat. no. 19)

Greek sources as the *tetragrammaton* due to its four-letter abbreviation in the Masoretic text of the Bible[6]. Moreover, in Deuteronomy God explicitly states that it is unlawful to make images for worship because Moses saw no "likeness" (ὁμοίωμα) within the Burning Bush (Deu 4:15). However, in the case under consideration here the name given at the Burning Bush is written on Christ's image.

Papamastorakis cited scattered instances of the *ho Ōn* on late thirteenth-century icons (**Fig. 3**), but pointed out that such examples are the exception and hypothesized that the inscription only proliferated during the fourteenth century[7]. Joseph Munitiz had reached the same conclusion slightly earlier in a footnote that seems to have been unknown to Papamastorakis. Munitiz observed that in 1241 the philosopher and student of medicine Nicephorus Blemmydes (d. 1269) founded a *hesychasterion* near Ephesus named tou Kyriou Christou tou Ontos (τοῦ Κυρίου Χριστοῦ τοῦ Ὄντος)[8]. Munitiz did not attempt to explain the *ho Ōn* by way of the unconventional name of this monastery but proposed, in passing, that both were probably the result of Christological debates stemming from the Synod of 1166. Unfortunately, Munitiz did not elaborate on this point, and it remains unclear how these theological disputes might have generated a new inscription.

The evidence of other media, which Papamastorakis did not survey, supports his contention that the *ho Ōn* was popularized in the fourteenth century. Indeed, other scholars have asserted that the *ho Ōn* was "traditional" and was a "principle" of earlier periods of Byzantine painting, but no attestation can in fact be securely placed before the late thirteenth century[9]. For instance, in an early study Nikolai Pokrovskii claimed that the *ho Ōn* appears "not later than the eleventh century" on the evidence of the crucifix of Avraamii of Rostov (d. ca. 1073) and the frescoes in Hagia Sophia, Kiev[10]. Presumably, Pokrovskii was basing his conclusions on post-medieval restorations to the Kievan fresco cycle, because no instance of the title survives in the original program[11]. Likewise, a recent redating of the Rostov cross has shown that the paleography of its letter forms and its overall design best align with fourteenth-century examples[12]. Thus, these two attestations do not provide any support for an earlier date.

Other ostensibly earlier instances prove to be equally illusory. For example, the inscription appears in the twelfth-century program at St. Panteleimon, Nerezi, but only on the sections that were repainted in the sixteenth century[13]. Similarly, the *ho Ōn* was added to the negative space of Christ's halo on Sviatoslav's Cross when it was removed from the facade of the Church of St. George at Iur'ev-Pol'skii in the fifteenth century[14]. The restorations to this early thirteenth-century church are notoriously poor, and in fact this mistake may reflect Communion stamps where the

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[6] See, on this name, A. SOLIGNAC, Nom, in: Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique XI. Paris 1982, 398–402, and R. J. WILKINSON, Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God. Boston 2015.

[7] PAPAMASTORAKIS, Diakosmos tou troulou 69–70; E. TSIGARIDAS, Eikones tou Byzantinou Mouseiou kai naōn tīs Kastorias (12os–16os aiōnas). Athens 2018, cat. no 49.

[8] J. MUNITIZ, Nikephoros Blemmydes: A Partial Account (*Spicilegium sacrum Lovaniense: études et documents* 48). Leuven 1988, 116–117, n. 73. On Blemmydes' *hesychasterion*, see R. JANIN, Les églises et les monastères des grands centres byzantins. Paris 1975, 247–248.

[9] See G. I. PASSARELLI, Nota su di una raffigurazione del Pantocrator a Dečani. *OCP* 44 (1978) 181–189, at 182: "Al posto, però, della tradizionale scritta ὁ ὤν, vi è accennato un motivo ornamentale che doveva consistere, (poiché è appena visibile), in quattro perle ed una pietra quadrata al centro, in ciascuno dei tre bracci della croce." And J. MEYENDORFF, Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes. New York 1974, 48: "[it was a] principle rigidly followed in classical Byzantine iconography that the only proper inscription was that of the *personal* God 'He who is'."

[10] N. POKROVSKII, Evangelie v pamiatnikakh ikonografii. St. Petersburg 1892, 357.

[11] See O. S. POPOVA – V. D. SARAB'IANOV, Mozaiki i freski Sviatoi Sofii Kievskoi. Moscow 2017, 66–125, 308–371.

[12] V. G. PUTSKO, Krest Prepodobnogo Avraamiia Rostovskogo. *Istoriia i kul'tura Rostovskoi zemli* (1995) 96–103.

[13] I. SINKEVIĆ, The Church of St. Panteleimon at Nerezi: Architecture, Programme, Patronage. Wiesbaden 2000, 30, 39, pl. 8a–b, figs. xv–xvi (Virgin), fig. 84 (Ancient of Days).

[14] See G. K. VAGNER, Mastera drevnerusskoi skul'ptury: rel'efy Iur'eva-Pol'skogo. Moscow 1966, 49–50, fig. 61.

letters IC XC / NI KA ('Jesus Christ Conquers') were written *beside* the incuse cross, not *on* it[15]. In book illumination attestations appear on leaves which were inserted into older manuscripts. For instance, a *ho Ōn* adorns the Christ Pantocrator at the beginning of an early thirteenth-century Gospel book at Stavronikita Monastery, but, as Annemarie Weyl-Carr has noted, this folio was painted by "a different and probably later hand than the other images."[16] Similarly, the *ho Ōn* features on the Logos Creator at the beginning of the twelfth-century Smyrna Octateuch (now lost), which John Lowden has argued was added "around 1300, perhaps even later" (**Fig. 4**)[17]. In short, even this very brief survey indicates that Papamastorakis is on solid ground with his dating.

Papamastorakis appealed to the liturgy and theology in order to account for the inscription's popularization. First, he cited a hymn sung at Vespers on the Feast of the Transfiguration, which includes the name *ho Ōn*: "The One who spoke to Moses long ago on Mount Sinai[18] through symbols, saying, 'I am the One who is,' today, on Mount Tabor, being transformed before his disciples, revealed the archetypal beauty of his image, assuming humanity's nature into himself."[19] While the hymn itself is older, Papamastorakis notes, this feast was of paramount importance to Hesychasts, who wrote exegetical treatises on Christ's Tabor theophany. Thus, as he reasons, Hesychasts would have promoted an inscription which drew attention to Christ's halo, because it radiates with light[20]. Second, Papamastorakis observed that John of Damascus (d. ca. 749) exalted this name above all others:

> "It seems to me that *ho Ōn* is worthier than every other name ascribed to God, since he himself used this name when he spoke to Moses on the mountain, saying: 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, "the One who is" hath sent me unto you' [Ex 3:14]. For he contains in himself the whole of being [ὅλον γὰρ ἐν ἑαυτῷ συλλαβὼν ἔχει τὸ εἶναι], which is as boundless and limitless as the sea."[21]

Papamastorakis's appeal to the liturgy and theology is promising, but as he leaves things, there are more questions than answers. First, it remains unclear how a single hymn could have guaranteed the success of a new inscription. Were there additional aspects of the feast that prompted patrons to rethink Christ's halo? Second, what precisely was the Hesychast understanding of this name? Papamastorakis cites John of Damascus's view that God "contains the whole of being in himself," but was this how Hesychasts interpreted this name?[22]

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[15] CABASILAS, *Explicatio divinae liturgiae* 6.2 (ed. R. BORNERT – J. GOUILLARD – P. PÉRICHON – S. SALAVILLE, Nicolas Cabasilas. Explication de la divine liturgie [*SC 4 bis*]. Paris 1967, 80); C. WALTER, IC XC NI KA: The Apotropaic Function of the Victorious Cross. *REB* 55 (1997) 193–220, at 198–201.

[16] A. WEYL-CARR, Byzantine Illumination, 1150–1250: The Study of a Provincial Tradition. Chicago 1987, 205 (cat. 25); G. GALAVARIS – Ch. MAUROPOULOU-TSIOUMĒ, Iera Monī Stavronikīta: Eikonografīmena cheirografa. Mount Athos 2007, 151, fig. 239.

[17] J. LOWDEN, The Octateuchs: A Study in Byzantine Manuscript Illumination. University Park 1992, 20.

[18] Horeb and Sinai had long been conflated in the Byzantine imagination. See I. DRPIĆ, Art, Hesychasm, and Visual Exegesis: Parisinus Graecus 1242 Revisited. *DOP* 62 (2008) 217–247, at 232 n. 84.

[19] PAPAMASTORAKIS, Diakosmos tou troulou 71, quoting C. CAPIZZI, Pantokratōr (saggio d'esegesi letterario-iconografica) (*OCA* 170). Rome 1964, 146. See a new edition in P. PLANK – C. LUTZKA – C. HANNICK, Das byzantinische Eigengut der neuzeitlichen slavischen Menäen und seine griechischen Originale (*Patristica slavica* 12). Paderborn 2006, II 1105. For the hymn's popularity, see N.-M. WANEK, Sticheraria in spät- und postbyzantinischer Zeit: Untersuchungen anhand der Stichera für August. Vienna 2013, 47–52.

[20] PAPAMASTORAKIS, Diakosmos tou troulou 71, 292–94. See, for an overview of Hesychasm, N. RUSSELL, The Hesychast Controversy, in: The Cambridge Intellectual History of Byzantium, ed. A. Kaldellis – N. Siniossoglou. Cambridge 2017, 494–509.

[21] PAPAMASTORAKIS, Diakosmos tou troulou 70. *Expositio fidei* 9, ll. 10–13 (ed. B. KOTTER, Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos, vol. 2 [*Patristische Texte und Studien* 12]. Berlin 1973, 31).

[22] Later PAPAMASTORAKIS, Diakosmos tou troulou 292–293, briefly cites Gregory Palamas and Joseph Calothetus, but he does not explore the theological debates over God's names.

Figure 4: Logos Creator, 12th century. Manuscript illumination. Smyrna, Evangelical School A.1. fol. 2ᵛ (now lost) (Photo: Kurt Weitzmann Archive, Department of Art & Archaeology, Princeton University)
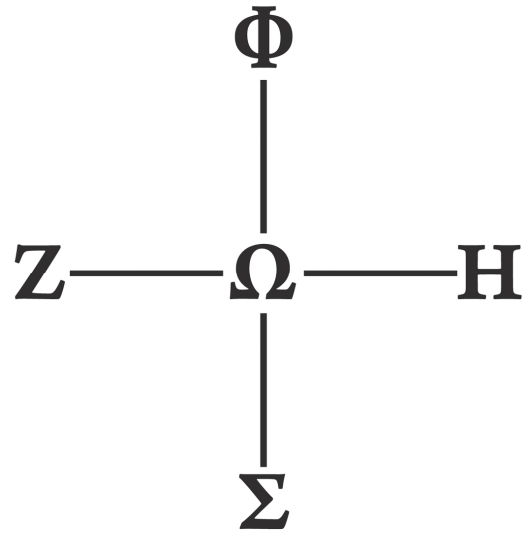

Figure 5: ΖΩΗ/ΦΩΣ (Zōē/Phōs) Monogram (Drawing by Sam Richter)

Figure 6: Theophanes the Greek, Christ Pantocrator, ca. 1378. Fresco. Novgorod, Church of the Transfiguration, detail (Photo: author)

In the following two sections I shall attempt to answer these questions. In section 2, I look at how the Transfiguration liturgy brought about a reconsideration of Christ's halo. In section 3, I examine how Hesychasts and their opponents interpreted this name and Christ's light. This wider body of theological writing is crucial because it shows how the festal liturgy took on an increased importance at this time, such that it could contribute to the flourishing of a new inscription. The final section discusses the *ho Ōn*'s reception in the Post-Byzantine world. Ending with this diachronic approach reveals that scholars should take care to distinguish between the fourteenth-century understanding of the *ho Ōn* and its later meanings.

It needs to be emphasized at the outset that the *ho Ōn* was a bold intervention on Christ's image. In earlier centuries Christ's halo had been adorned with gems and pearls, increasing its lavish splendor, but the distinction between letters—which carry a semantic value—and stones is important, especially when those letters are a name[23]. In rare cases Christ's halo had been given a label, but none of these ever became a commonplace. For instance, in the West one finds the letters LUX, REX, and PAX, as well as the acronyms RGD, for *Rex Gloriae Dominus* ("King of glory, the Lord", Ps 24:8), and DCO, probably either for the incipit *Deus Creator Omnium* or *Deus Creator Omnipotens*[24]. In Byzantine art, Christ's halo was occasionally inscribed with the letters ΦΩC (Phōs – *light*) or ΖΩH (Zōē – *life*), but there are only a handful of such examples, whereas there are hundreds of instances of the *ho Ōn* across a range of media[25]. Moreover, ΖΩH and ΦΩΣ build on the monogram tradition where the two words were written perpendicular to each other with the *omega* at the crossbars (**Fig. 5**)[26]. By contrast, the *ho Ōn* is without a visual precedent. Thus, the *ho Ōn* was a remarkable epigraphic development, and several factors must have converged in leading to its dissemination. Patrons were quite literally reframing Christ's face.

POPULARIZATION OF THE *HO ŌN* THROUGH THE LITURGY

How the liturgy prompted patrons to rethink Christ's halo can be studied through the Christ Pantocrator in the dome of the Church of the Transfiguration on Elijah Street in Novgorod (**Fig. 6**). Commissioned by "the god-fearing boyar Vasilii Danilovich and the residents of Elijah Street," the frescoes adorning the walls and ceiling of this slender church were executed in 1378 by the Constantinopolitan painter Theophanes "the Greek."[27] The imposing Christ Pantocrator is located high above the floor, gazing down into the sanctuary where the congregation would have gathered in worship. Unfortunately, the upper part of the halo is abraded, and the *omicron* is difficult to see, but the *omega* and *nu* appear clearly on the left and right bars.

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[23] See M. COLLINET-GUÉRIN, Histoire du nimbe, des origins aux temps modernes. Paris 1961, 407, who writes: "La grande monotonie des nimbes est parfois coupée par de rares nimbes perlés et par la croix du Christ ornée de lettres grecques." For bejeweled nimbi, see, as exemplary, P. MILJKOVIK-PEPEK, Deloto na zografite Mihailo i Eutikhij (*Kulturno-istorisko nasledstvo vo SR Makedonija* 10). Skopje 1967, 147, fig. 57.

[24] R. FAVREAU, Des inscriptions pour l'image du Christ (XIe–XIIIe siècles), in: Qu'est-ce que nommer? L'image légendée entre monde monastique et pensée scolastique, ed. C. Heck. Turnhout 2010, 169–185, at 169–170; R. S. NELSON, An Icon at Mt. Sinai and Christian Painting in Muslim Egypt during the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. *Art Bulletin* 65, no. 2 (1983) 201–218, at 201 n. 5; M. SCHAPIRO, Notes on Castelseprio. *Art Bulletin* 39, no. 2 (1957) 292–299, at 296 n. 33.

[25] See L. CAPONE, La cripta delle Sante Marina e Cristina in Carpignano Salentino. Carpignano Salentino 1977, 33–34, 37, 39; L. SAFRAN, Redating Some South Italian Frescoes: The First Layer at S. Pietro, Otranto, and the Earliest Paintings at S. Maria della Croce, Casaranello. *Byz* 60 (1990) 307–333, fig. 7; J. R. MARTIN, The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus. Princeton 1954, 11, 184.

[26] See F. DAIM – B. FOURLAS – K. HORST – V. TSAMAKDA, Spätantike und Byzanz. Bestandskatalog Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe: Objekte aus Bein, Elfenbein, Glas, Keramik, Metall und Stein. Mainz 2017, 144, pl. 82; CAPIZZI, Pantokratōr 109.

[27] On Theophanes, see V. N. LAZAREV, Feofan Grek i ego shkola. Moscow 1961; on the church, see especially G. I. VZDORNOV, Freski Feofana Greka v tserkvi Spasa Preobrazheniia v Novgorode: k 600-letiiu sushchestvovaniia fresok, 1378–1978. Moscow 1976.

In the medallion encircling the image is an inscription, written in Slavonic, which is found in other Palaiologan domes:

"From heaven did the Lord behold the earth, to hear the groaning of the prisoner, to loose those that are appointed to death, to declare the name of the Lord in Zion." (Ps 101:20–22)[28]

Offering viewers an interpretation of the majestic Pantocrator, the Psalms text suggests that Christ is the Lord who reigns in heaven, while they, the believers who stand below, are prisoners of the earth. Groaning and appointed to death, when they cry out, Christ shall save them.

Calling attention to the Lord's name (*onoma*), the verses invite a reconsideration of the inscriptions on Christ's image. In what is now the cream-colored field beside Christ is the *nomen sacrum* (IC XC), which had been written beside his portrait since Iconoclasm, while the *ho Ōn* adorns his halo[29]. Crucially, the forms of the two inscriptions invite different responses. Serving as a standard invocation in prayer, and especially in the "Jesus Prayer" taught by Hesychasts, "Jesus Christ" was written with ligatures—a form of medieval shorthand. However, the name *ho Ōn* seems not to have been commonly prayed, and it was laid out conspicuously on the three bars of the incuse cross, thereby maximizing its visual impact[30]. This presentation of the divine name asked to be *seen*, as much as *read*. Thus, if the *nomen sacrum* was to be identified with Christ's body, the *ho Ōn*'s imagistic lettering was to be related to the light encircling his face[31].

Notably, the Transfiguration liturgy focused worshipers on Christ's radiant face. The Old Testament says that Moses spoke "face to face" with God on Sinai, but when the prophet requested to see the divine "glory," God replied that he could only see his backside, since "no man can see my face [τὸ πρόσωπον] and live" (Ex 33:11, 18, 20)[32]. Crucially, Moses was only able to see God's "face" at the Transfiguration, an event described in the New Testament where the prophet is portrayed conversing with Christ on Mount Tabor (Mt 17:3)[33]. The initial letters of an acrostic canon, sung at Matins, declared unequivocally what Moses witnessed on the mountain that day: Μωσῆς Θεοῦ πρόσωπον ἐν Θαβὼρ εἶδε ("Moses saw the face of God on Tabor")[34]. Equally important, the rite of Communion linked Christ's radiant face to the joy of his name: "We shall walk, O Lord, in the light of the glory of your face [προσώπου], and in your name [ὀνόματι] we shall

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[28] See VZDORNOV, Freski 28 n. 4; for the inscription elsewhere, see A. Đ. GAVRILOVIĆ, Christ Pantocrator in the Dome of the Church of the Virgin Hodegetria in the Patriarchate of Peć: Iconography and Meaning. *Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti* 43 (2015) 13–30, at 20–21, who observes that this psalm was sung at orthros on Easter.

[29] K. BOSTON, The Power of Inscriptions and the Trouble with Texts, in: Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium, ed. A. Eastmond – L. James. Burlington 2003, 35–57; also, C. BARBER, Neophytus Prodromenus on Epigraphy, in: Theologisches Wissen und die Kunst: Festschrift für Martin Büchsel, ed. R. Müller – A. Rau – J. Scheel. Berlin 2015, 211–225.

[30] On invocations and *nomina sacra*, see I. HAUSHERR, Noms du Christ et voies d'oraison (*OCA* 157). Rome 1960, 254–255; also U. SILL, "Nomina Sacra" im Altkirchen-Slavischen, bis zum 11. Jahrhundert (*Forum slavicum* 40). Munich 1972, and T. BENNER, Gottes Namen anrufen im Gebet: Studien zur Acclamatio Nominis Dei und zur Konstituierung religiöser Subjektivität. Paderborn 2001, 217–246. On the Jesus Prayer, see K. WARE, A Fourteenth-Century Manual of Hesychast Prayer: The Century of St. Kallistos and St. Ignatios Xanthopoulos. Toronto 1995.

[31] On imagistic lettering, see J. HAMBURGER – B. M. BEDOS-REZAK, Introduction, in: Sign and Design: Script as Image in Cross-Cultural Perspective (300–1600 CE). Washington, DC 2016, 1–16.

[32] For the lection, see J. MATEOS, Le typicon de la Grande Église: Ms. Sainte-Croix no. 40, Xe siècle (*OCA* 165–166). Rome 1962–1963, I 360; R. H. JORDAN, The Synaxarion of the Monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis (*Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations* 6.5–6.6). Belfast 2000–2005, II 230, and L. MIRKOVIĆ – Đ. TRIFUNOVIĆ, ed., Tipik arhiepiskopa Nikodima. Belgrade 2004–2007, II 118v.

[33] MATEOS, Le typicon de la Grande Église I 362; MIRKOVIĆ – TRIFUNOVIĆ, Tipik arhiepiskopa Nikodima II 119r.

[34] See, for an example of the acrostic, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, MS 4694 (*Diktyon* 40171), f. 165ᵛ (ca. 13th c.) (hereafter Madrid, BnE MS 4694). On the canon, see A. LOUTH, St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology. Oxford 2002, 268–274.

rejoice unto the ages" (Ps 88:16–17)[35]. Beseeching worshipers to meditate on the "glory of Christ's face," the text provided patrons and artists with an initial impetus to reconsider Christ's halo. Moreover, the Communion text's emphasis on Christ's "light" and "name" (a source of "joy") affirmed the decision to place the name given to Moses at the Burning Bush within the halo. In effect, the inscription identified Christ's nimbus with the light of Tabor. This circular light disclosed the "Being" who hid itself from Moses on Sinai.

The liturgy also supported the decision to write the letters on the incuse cross. Vespers began with a hymn that drew a connection between Christ's transfiguration and his crucifixion. Opening with the refrain "Before your Cross," the first two sections outline how Christ was "testified to by the Father" during his transfiguration, as he prepared his disciples in the "light of his resurrection" for his imminent "betrayal" and "suffering."[36] This association was borrowed from the New Testament passage in which Christ warns his disciples that he shall be sacrificed in Jerusalem (Matt 17:9)[37]. Finally, Christ's transfiguration was cast in anticipation of his crucifixion at an even broader level within the liturgical calendar. The Feast of the Transfiguration was celebrated on August sixth so as to mark a forty-day period of looking ahead to the Feast of the Exaltation of the True Cross, which was celebrated on September fourteenth[38].

Hymn writers and homilists also characterize Christ's transfiguration through his impending crucifixion[39]. For instance, in an influential homily Anastasius of Sinai (d. after 700) describes how Christ foretold the Passion in his conversation with Moses and Elijah on Tabor: "According to Luke, Moses and Elijah spoke with Christ about all of this on the mountain, discussing 'the exodus' of his soul from his body, 'which he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem' in the suffering of the Cross (Lk 9:31)."[40] Anastasius's comment was repeated by Gregory of Sinai (d. after 1337), a teacher of Hesychast prayer, as well as by the metropolitan of Kiev, Gregory Camblak (r. 1413–1420), who supported Hesychast theologians[41].

The three bands of light in Christ's halo thus could be read as a sign of the Cross, but they could also be seen as a symbol of the Trinity. This reading finds support in Symeon of Thessaloniki (d. 1429), who, in a brief discussion of nimbi, describes Christ's tri-partite halo as follows: "the three-fold light of the Savior is yet a circle because the Trinity is one, and the Father and Son are in

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[35] A. DOSTÁL – H. ROTHE – E. TRAPP, Der altrussische Kondakar': auf der Grundlage des Blagověščenskij Nižegorodskij Kondakar' (*Bausteine zur Geschichte der Literatur bei den Slawen* 8,1–7). Giessen 1976–2004, VII 368; D. E. CONOMOS, The Late Byzantine and Slavonic Communion Cycle: Liturgy and Music. Washington, DC 1985, 32–33, 50.

[36] See Madrid, BnE, MS 4694 (*Diktyon* 40171), ff. 162ʳ–163ᵛ.

[37] This verse appears on frescoes showing Christ and his disciples descending Tabor. I. SPATHARAKIS, Byzantine Wall Paintings of Crete: Rethymnon Province. London 1999, 128, 291, fig. 149.

[38] This 'pairing' of the two feasts in the liturgical calendar has been seen as influencing 'pairings' of the two feast scenes in church decoration. See V. D. SARAB'IANOV, Strastnoi kontekst 'Preobrazheniia' v vizantiiskom i drevnerusskom iskusstve. *Vestnik Pravoslavnogo Sviato-Tikhonovskogo gumanitarnogo universiteta* 3, no. 3 (2010) 7–30.

[39] For hymns, see Kondakion eis tēn metamorphōsin, ll. 1–6 (V 134–135 DOSTÁL – ROTHE – TRAPP); Andrew of Crete, *In transfigurationem domini*, ll. 50–56 (ed. G. SCHIRÒ, Analecta hymnica Graeca e codicibus eruta Italiae Inferioris. Rome 1966–1983, XII 46), and Cosmas of Maiuma, Kanōn eis tēn metamorphōsin, ll. 57–61 (ed. W. CHRIST – M. PARANIKAS, Anthologia Graeca carminum christianorum. Leipzig 1871, 177).

[40] Logos eis tēn hagian metamorphōsin 10 (ed. A. GUILLOU, Le monastère de la Théotokos au Sinai: origines, épiclèse, mosaïque de la Transfiguration, homélie inédite d'Anastase le Sinaïte sur la Transfiguration [étude et texte critique]. *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 67 [1955] 215–256, at 251).

[41] Gregory of Sinai, *Sermo de transfiguratione* 8 (ed. DAVID BALFOUR, Saint Gregory the Sinaite: Discourse on the Transfiguration. San Bernardino 1986, 28). Gregory Camblak's homily still lacks an edition. I here follow Moscow, Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia biblioteka, f. 304.I (glav. sobr. Troitse-sergievoi lavry, 409), MS 680, f. 191ᵛ (16ᵗʰ c.) (hereafter RGB, TSL 680). On the manuscripts, see Iu. K. BEGUNOV, Tvorcheskoe nasledie Grigoriia Tsamblaka. Veliko Tŭrnovo 2005, 110. Anastasius's homily was translated into Slavonic. See Moscow, Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia biblioteka, fond 310 (sobr. Undol'skogo), MS 232, ff. 42ʳ–48ʳ (early 15th c.). On the sermon, see A. ANGUSHEVA-TIHANOVA, The Mount Reflecting Heaven: The Sermon on the Transfiguration by Gregory Camblak in the Context of Byzantine and Medieval Slavic Literature. *BSl* 62 (2004) 217–238.

him."[42] Implying that the halo's circularity represents the unity of the godhead, Symeon interprets the three bands of light as a symbol of God's three persons.

The aforementioned homilies likewise indicate that Christ's incuse halo could be seen as a trinitarian sign. Each of the three authors describes Christ's transfiguration as a revelation of the threefold God "who is." Thus, Anastasius of Sinai imagines Moses declaring: "Now I have seen you who truly are, who exist eternally, being with the Father, and who said on the mountain [i.e. Sinai], 'I am the One who is'" [Νῦν εἶδόν σε τὸν ὄντως ὄντα καὶ ἀεὶ ὄντα καὶ σὺν τῷ Πατρὶ ὄντα καὶ ἐν ὄρει εἰπόντα· Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν][43]. Similarly, Gregory of Sinai focuses on Moses' vision of Christ, stating: "Now earlier, Moses gazed in darkness upon the one, three-fold God who is [τὸν ὄντα τριαδικὸν ἕνα Θεὸν] … but here, glimpsing 'the One who is' [τὸν ὄντα], the one of the Trinity who is made flesh on Tabor, who is molded by the unapproachable light, and whose glory shines forth, he rejoices."[44] Finally, Gregory Camblak writes: "It seems fitting to worship him [i.e. Christ] somehow, humbly with great reverence … because now I have seen you 'who are,' the 'one who is eternally,' and who is with the Father and Spirit in every age" [*nyne videkh tia sushchago i prisnosushchago i s'' ottsem'' i dukhom'' v'veky sushchago*][45].

In each case, the name "Being" describes the divinity who hid itself from Moses on Mount Sinai but who now reveals itself through Christ on Mount Tabor. These comments suggest that viewers could have seen the *ho Ōn* as a reflection of Moses's vision of the threefold God. Moreover, they indicate that Hesychasts would indeed have been interested in promoting the *ho Ōn*. Seeing the letters arranged schematically in the light, Hesychast viewers would have interpreted the halo as the space where God's pure ontology shines forth. In this way, a sign of suffering, the Cross, is reconfigured as the rays of the Trinity revealed in Christ's face.

The liturgical texts and homilies thus suggest that the *ho Ōn* would have appealed to Hesychasts. Numerous texts drew attention to Christ's light and imbued his portrait ('face') with transfiguration semantics. However, the inscription also bore a polemical edge, one that can only be understood by turning to the theological disputes which drove patrons to investigate the liturgy in the first place. The *ho Ōn* affirmed God's visibility through light, but in so doing it implicitly rejected the philosophical position of opponents who wanted to call the godhead by a different title: namely, *ousia*, or 'substance.' The following section explores the debates between Hesychasts and their challengers concerning Christ's light and the truthfulness of the divine names, foremost among them "Being." In the end, the Church's official acceptance of Hesychast theology guaranteed that the *ho Ōn* would become a canonical, if not obligatory inscription on Christ's image.

THEOLOGICAL DEBATE OVER CHRIST'S LIGHT AND NAMES

The theological views of Hesychasts were formulated in opposition to their critics. In the late 1330s Gregory Palamas (d. 1359), the leading Hesychast theologian, was engaged in a prolonged dispute with Barlaam of Calabria (d. 1348), a Greek-Italian monk and teacher in Constantinople.

Barlaam took issue with a host of Gregory's positions, but for the present purposes, the most important of them were Gregory's understanding of Christ's names and light. In a letter from early 1336, Barlaam cited the influential theologian Pseudo-Dionysius (*fl.* late 5th c.) to argue that God is unknowable. Pseudo-Dionysius, Barlaam argues, heeded Plato's teaching that "there is no name of him [God], definition, sensation, opinion, science, or tactile intuition, or understanding. Nor is

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[42] *Responsa ad Gabrielem Pentapolitanum* 18. *PG* 155:869C.

[43] Logos eis tēn hagian metamorphōsin 8 (247 GUILLOU).

[44] *Sermo de transfiguratione* 8 (28 BALFOUR).

[45] RGB, TSL 680, ff. 191ᵛ–192ʳ.

he named, expressed, opined, or known."[46] For Barlaam, to affirm God's unknowability is simply to believe in his "divine transcendence" (τὴν θείαν ὑπεροχὴν). God is the Creator, the source of all being, but on that count, he is beyond being itself. Existence, in other words, is not enough for God, for he utterly transcends it. For this reason, Barlaam notes, Pseudo-Dionysius taught that "[divinity] is even beyond the very idea of being [ἀλλ᾽ ἤδη καὶ αὐτῆς τῆς τοῦ εἶναι ψιλῆς ἐπινοίας ἐπέκεινά φησιν αὐτὸ εἶναι]." Drawing an analogy, Barlaam closes by likening God to the sun which makes everything visible but which is so bright that it blinds the eye. In the same way, God makes knowledge possible but exceeds human understanding[47].

Barlaam elaborated on God's unknowability in his defense of the Orthodox faith. Presented at the court in 1335, the Greek text was suppressed after his condemnation in 1341 and survives only in a Slavonic translation dating to the 1370s[48]. Here Barlaam engages in a lengthy discussion of God's names. Once again, he argues towards a paradoxical understanding of the divine nature. On the one hand, names such as "Being" can be applied to God since he is the Creator and must contain being in himself, but, on the other, God transcends everything in existence:

> "Simply put, the divinity is none of the things that exist, and yet he is all of them. He is none of them because he is above and beyond everything, but he is all of them in so far as he is their cause, given that everything has been created through him. Therefore, all of the names apply to him, as has already been said: 'Life,' 'Light,' 'Good,' 'Essence,' 'Wisdom,' 'One,' and 'Being' in so far as he is the cause and the creator of all things, and yet he is none of them."[49]

Placing God beyond any stable semantic content, Barlaam claims that names fail to hold onto their ordinary sense in his presence. Distinguishing sharply between God's nature and the nature of created entities, Barlaam argues that the divine names either properly refer to divinity or worldly things, but not both, because "even being as such cannot be understood as common to them." Thus, "if those things exist and are being, then God does not exist due to his superiority; and if he is being, then they do not exist."[50] Having arrived at this impasse, Barlaam draws into doubt theological terminology. If God is called "Being," then there is no way to understand the meaning of this name, because divinity is transcendent. On the other hand, if things are properly called "being," then they cannot possibly convey any theological knowledge. Thus, as the scribe writes, in a scholium that summarizes the problem:

> "We ascribe many names to divinity: 'Life,' 'Light,' and the like. But as many as we ascribe to him, affirming him, still we cannot grasp him, for names can never pick out and disclose

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[46] *Ep.* 3.50 (ed. A. FYRIGOS, Dalla controversia palamitica alla polemica esicastica: con un'edizione critica delle Epistole greche di Barlaam [*Medioevo* 11]. Rome 2005, 336). Quoting Plato, *Rep.* 508a4–b10.

[47] *Ep.* 3.51–52 (336–338 FYRIGOS). The sun metaphor derives from Plato. See H. KRÄMER, Gesammelte Aufsätze zu Platon (*Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 321). Berlin 2014, 122–148, and commentary in Proclus, *In Rem publ.*, 14 (276.23–281.7). On the Platonic background of Barlaam's epistemology, see M. TRIZIO, 'Una è la verità che pervade ogni cosa': la sapienza profana nelle opere perdute di Barlaam Calabro, in: Byzantine Theology and its Philosophical Background, ed. A. Rigo (*Studies in Byzantine History and Civilization* 4). Turnhout 2011, 108–140.

[48] See Y. KAKRIDIS – L. TASEVA, Gegen die Lateiner: Traktate von Gregorios Palamas und Barlaam von Kalabrien in kirchenslavischer Übersetzung (*Monumenta linguae slavicae dialecti veteris* 63). Freiburg 2014, 11, 14; the lost Greek archetype was proposed by Barlaam's editor, A. FYRIGOS, Barlaam Calabro. Opere contro i latini (*StT* 347–348). Rome 1998. Fyrigos posited a lost archetype for items A 3–4, 5, 9, and B 1–6. On Barlaam's activity at this time, see C. GIANNELLI, Un progetto di Barlaam per l'unione delle chiese, in: Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati, III: Letteratura e storia bizantina (*StT* 123). Rome 1946, 157–208.

[49] *Na latine* 53r (357 KAKRIDIS – TASEVA).

[50] *Na latine* 54r (365 KAKRIDIS – TASEVA).

divinity to us. Similarly, as many things as we deny of him, [claiming] that the divinity is not this or that, still we will not grasp him."[51]

In short, for Barlaam, names, including 'Being,' do not convey positive theological knowledge.

For Gregory Palamas this conclusion was untenable. In his view the saints can truly know God. In his defense of Hesychast theology, commonly known as the *Triads* (ca. 1330s), Gregory took issue with Barlaam calling God "substance" (*ousia*). For Barlaam, this Platonic term denoted a perfect Other who lies beyond the reach of syllogistic logic[52]. But for Gregory, it amounted to a rejection of the name that God had chosen for himself on Mount Sinai, namely *ho Ōn*. Notably, the latter name shares the same verbal root (*eimi*) as *ousia*, revealing the immense philosophical stakes of the *ho Ōn* inscription.

Challenging Barlaam's tendency to refer to God as *ousia*, Gregory asks:

> "Would you claim to say that what possesses all of these powers in itself in a unique and uni-fying manner does so on account of substance? For in the first place, divinity must be called 'God,' since this is the name that we have received from the Church. *When God was consult-ing with Moses, he did not say, 'I am the substance,' but 'I am the One who is.' Therefore, the One who is does not derive from substance, but substance from his being. 'For the One who is contains the whole of being in himself'"* [καὶ τῷ Μωυσῇ δὲ χρηματίζων ὁ Θεὸς οὐκ εἶπεν «ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ οὐσία», ἀλλ᾽ «ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν»· οὐ γὰρ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας ὁ ὤν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐκ τοῦ ὄντος ἡ οὐσία· αὐτὸς γὰρ ὁ ὢν ὅλον ἐν ἑαυτῷ συνείληφε τὸ εἶναι][53].

Here, Gregory offers two reasons for rejecting the name 'substance.' First, Church tradition calls the first cause 'God,' and so it would be wrong to call it 'substance.' Second, God did not name himself *ousia* when speaking with Moses, and so using that name disregards God's own choice. Venturing to suggest that the name *ho Ōn* entails the logical primacy of God's being over his substance, Gregory boldly asserts that being is that from which substance derives, not vice ver-sa.

In the last line Gregory quotes chapter 5 of Pseudo-Dionysius's *On the Divine Names* which is dedicated to the title "Being." Gregory's interest in this treatise is not surprising given that Pseudo-Dionysius was seen as an authority by both sides in the Hesychast debates[54]. In fact, Gregory quo-

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[51] *Na latine* 53v (363 KAKRIDIS – TASEVA).

[52] For background, see G. PODSKALSKY, Theologie und Philosophie in Byzanz: der Streit um die theologische Methodik in der spätbyzantinischen Geistesgeschichte (14.–15. Jh.), seine systematischen Grundlagen und seine historische Entwick-lung (*Byzantinisches Archiv* 15). Munich 1977, 127–50; K. IERODIAKONOU, The Anti-Logical Movement of the Fourteenth Century, in: Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources, ed. eadem. Oxford 2002, 219–236; J. A. DEMETRACOPOULOS, Palamas Transformed: Palamite Interpretations of the Distinction between God's 'Essence' and 'Energies' in Late Byzan-tium, in: Greeks, Latins, and Intellectual History 1204–1500, ed. M. Hinterberger – C. Schabel (*Bibliotheca* 11). Leuven 2011, 263–372.

[53] *Pro hesychastis* 3.2.12 (ed. J. MEYENDORFF, Grégoire Palamas: Défense des saints hésychastes [*Spicilegium sacrum Lovani-ense: études et documents* 30–31]. Louvain 1959, II 665). On Palamas's remark, see PAPAMASTORAKIS, Diakosmos tou troulou 293; A. GIEVTITS, Ho Ōn (= Giachbe) hōs Zōn kai Alēthinos Theos, hopōs peri autou martyrei ho Hagios Grēgorios ho Palamās, in: Praktika Theologikou Synedriou eis timēn kai mnēmēn tou en hagiois patros hēmōn Grēgoriou Archiepisko-pou Thessalonikēs tou Palamā, 12–14 November 1984, ed. G. I. Mantzaridis. Thessaloniki 1986, 111–134, esp. 117–118, and Arkh. KIPRIAN (KERN), Antropologiia sv. Grigoriia Palamy. Moscow 1950, 281, who observes that Gregory elsewhere "disagrees with calling God the Biblical 'One who is' even though this name is … embraced by other Church Fathers as the only acceptable name." See, for instance, *Capita* 78 where he adopts a more apophatic line of reasoning (ed. R. E. SINKE-WICZ, Gregory Palamas: The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters [*Studies and texts, PIMS* 83]. Toronto 1988, 172–175).

[54] See D. STIERNON, Bulletin sur le palamisme. *REB* 30 (1972) 231–341, esp. 302, 312–314; P. SCAZZOSO, Lo Pseudo-Dionigi nell'interpretazione di Gregorio Palama. *Rivista di filosofia neo-scolastica* 59 (1967) 671–699, and KIPRIAN (KERN), Antropologiia 276–287.

tes the very same line from the text as John of Damascus does in the passage cited by Papamasto-rakis (see above): "[God] contains the whole of being in himself [ὅλον ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὸ εἶναι συνειληφώς]."[55] Pseudo-Dionysius, in turn, was following Gregory of Nazianzus (d. ca. 390) who had explained this name as meaning that "[God] contains the whole of being in himself [ὅλον ... ἐν ἑαυτῷ συλλαβὼν ἔχει τὸ εἶναι]."[56] For his own part, Gregory Palamas was appealing to Pseudo-Dionysius in order to offer a strong reading of the phrase "in himself" (ἐν ἑαυτῷ). In essence, Gregory interprets this language as a rebuke of Barlaam's contention that God stands *outside* of existence and thus *transcends* being. For if, Gregory argues, Pseudo-Dionysius says that God "contains" being "in himself," then can he really stand "apart" from it?

Gregory lays out this line of reasoning in a refutation of Barlaam's metaphor of the transcendent sun. Importantly, his rejoinder shows that Hesychasts could have seen Christ's halo as an immanent light which "contains the whole of being *in itself*." Speaking of St. Benedict's visions, Gregory observes that the saint beheld "the entirety of being [πάντα … τὰ ὄντα] gathered into a single ray of this intelligible sun."[57] St. Benedict "learned through contemplation … and union with the light beyond the intellect that this sun truly *is* [μαθὼν ἀπὸ τῆς θεωρίας … καὶ τῆς πρὸς αὐτὸ ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἑνώσεως ὅτι ἐστὶν ὡς ἀληθῶς]" and that "it differs from all things, is absolute, and unique and yet that it *mysteriously contains everything in itself* [ἄλλο τι παρὰ τὰ ὄντα πάντα ὄν, ὂν δὲ κυρίως τε καὶ μόνον καὶ πᾶν ὂν ἀπορρήτως ἐν ἑαυτῷ συνειληφός]."[58] In these sentences, Gregory argues that the light standing outside the world has entered the world and submitted itself to sense perception. What this entails is clarified when Gregory says that St. Benedict grasped God through "contemplation" (τῆς θεωρίας), implying that sensory experience has left behind its own finitude. In contemplation the difference between the seer and that which is seen—the human eye that gazes and the divine sun that shines—is swept away. As Gregory eloquently writes later on, the eye "separates itself from all other creatures and becomes itself entirely light and is assimilated to what it sees." Gazing purely upon God, sight is transformed into divine illumination itself: "If it [i.e. sight] sees itself, it sees light. If it beholds the object of vision, that too is light. And if it looks at the means by which it sees, again it is light."[59]

What Gregory describes in these passages is a way of looking in which subject, object, and medium merge. Worldly relations fall away in an outpouring of light. Whereas in ordinary vision, the sense of sight produces distance and difference, in spiritual sight light becomes maximally inclusive, uncovering a primitive unity in which everything has become one.

In the next generation, Barlaam's followers critiqued Gregory's defense of contemplation. In a rebuttal of Palamite theology, the scholastic theologian John Cyparissiotes (d. 1383) argued against Gregory's understanding of the metaphor of "containing."[60] Cyparissiotes brings together many of the foregoing themes, and I quote him at length:

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[55] *De divinis nominibus* 5.4 (ed. B. R. SUCHLA, Corpus Dionysiacum I. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita de Divinis Nominibus [*Patristische Texte und Studien* 33]. Berlin 1990, 183).

[56] *Or.* 38.7 (ed. C. MORESCHINI, Grégoire de Nazianze. Discours 38–41 [*SC* 318]. Paris 1990, 114).

[57] Gregory's choice of a western saint may be due to the ongoing debate over St. Benedict's visions. See P. KLEIN, From the Heavenly to the Trivial: Vision and Visual Perception in Early and High Medieval Apocalypse Illustration, in: The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome, and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996, ed. H. Kessler – G. Wolf. Bologna 1998, 247–278, at 273–274.

[58] *Pro hesychastis* 1.3.22 (I 157 MEYENDORFF).

[59] *Pro hesychastis* 2.3.36 (II 459–461 MEYENDORFF).

[60] On Cyparissiotes, see B. L. DENTAKIS, Joannes Kyparissiotes Stoicheiodes Ekthesis ton Theologikon Rheseon: ihre Überlieferung und ihr Gehalt, *Theologia* 29 (1958) 115–124, 301–311, 411–420; 30 (1959) 492–502; 32 (1961) 108–124, 305–323, 437–454; I. POLEMIS, Theologica varia inedita saeculi XIV (*CCSG* 76). Turnhout 2012, 53–58, 61–63.

"God's life is unlimited, and one and nothing is added to it. For an addition is a lessening in the perfection of that life. It is difficult to think that he (i.e. God) meant anything else when he said, 'I am the One who is,' and again when he said, 'I am the life' (Jn 11:25). 'God is substance,' says divine Maximus [the Confessor]; 'he is apart from what is in a substrate, and an intellect having in no way at all a substrate [«οὐσία γάρ ἐστιν ὁ Θεός », ὡς ὁ θεῖος εἴρηκε Μάξιμος, «τοῦ ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ χωρίς, καὶ νόησις μὴ ἔχουσά τι καθάπαξ ὑποκείμενον»].' And again, 'By nature God lacks an underlying substance which receives intellect, but rather is according to his very substance intellect.' If, then, God is substance, not admitting anything other than itself, what else should we understand when he says, 'I am the One who is?' and again 'I am the life?' For the one manifests his being, the other his life. Hence, if his being, which is his substance, is apart from a substrate, since the substance of God is being not by sharing in being, but he himself is his own being, as the most divine theologian [Pseudo-] Dionysius says, 'he contains the whole of being' [καὶ ὅλον συλλαβὼν ἔχει τὸ εἶναι], and as Gregory the Theologian also says, then it is not reasonable to contemplate [θεωρῆσαι] life in him. For it is necessary for whatever receives something besides itself to be either its material or a thing comparable to material. Knowing this, the theologians fled the suggestion that God's substance is receptive to other things."[61]

For Cyparissiotes, Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) provides a key authority for calling God "substance." Crucially, Maximus argued that God stands "apart" (χωρὶς) from substrates, meaning that his nature in no way participates in created beings. It is within the context of God's transcendence, Cyparissiotes argues, that one must read Pseudo-Dionysius who says that God "contains the whole of being in himself," because this does not mean that the predicate "being" applies to his nature. One can hardly overstate the importance of this conclusion, because, as Cyparissiotes observes, it entails that God can in no way be "contemplated" (θεωρῆσαι). Striking at the heart of the Palamite mystical project, Cyparissiotes undermines its crucial assumption. If the senses only latch onto finite substrates, then they cannot apprehend an infinite God.

The foregoing overview of the theological literature indicates that the *ho Ōn*'s success was due to the high stakes of this name in the Hesychast controversy. Papamastorakis was right to draw attention to the language of God "containing the whole of being in himself," but theologians were not debating John of Damascus but Pseudo-Dionysius's *On the Divine Names*.

One should stress that Gregory Palamas's view of this name was groundbreaking. For most Byzantine thinkers, "Being" denoted a transcendent deity who lies beyond cognition, not a being who is revealed in light. Thus, Theodore II Ducas Lascaris (d. 1258) deduced oneness, threeness, and then oneness-in-threeness from the name "Being," implying that the very idea of God is a paradox which eludes rational comprehension[62]. Similarly, in a discussion of the Creed, Constantine the Philosopher (d. after 1431) claimed that the name given to Moses means that "a being which is nothing existing is not able to be known through a resemblance to any existing thing, because it is not visible to human eyes."[63] For these thinkers "Being" indicates a God who cannot possibly be fathomed, much less be seen by the eyes. However, for Gregory Palamas this name signaled the pinnacle of visual experience, a revelation ensured by Moses's witness to the Transfiguration. In contemplation, the saints are mysteriously able to intuit God's being.

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[61] *Contra Tomum Palamiticum* 4.3 ll. 34–53 (ed. K. Liakouras, Iōannou tou Kyparissiōtou Kata tōn tou Palamikou tomou diakriseōn kai henōseōn en tō theō. Athens 1991, 227). Quoting Maximus the Confessor, *PG* 90:1125D, 1116C.
[62] Ch. Th. Krikones, Theodōrou B´ Laskareōs Peri christianikēs theologias logoi. Thessaloniki 1988, 85–123.
[63] See I. V. Iagich, Kniga Konstantina Filosofa i Grammatika O pis'menekh, in: Rassuzhdeniia iuzhnoslavianskoi i russkoi stariny o tserkovno-slavianskom iazyke, Tom 1. St. Petersburg 1895, 465.

The theological literature thus suggests that the *ho Ōn* inscription bore a polemical edge. It demonstrates that when Hesychasts applied this name to Christ's image, they intended to reject the argument that God should be called *ousia*. In so doing, they implicitly endorsed Gregory's claim that the saints behold divinity, and not some other being, in Christ's radiant face. This is important because Barlaam's follower, Prochorus Cydones (d. 1369), would observe that Christ sent an angel to the Evangelist John, declaring: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, saith the Lord, who is [ὁ ὤν], and who was, and who is to come, the Pantocrator" (Rev 1:8)[64]. For Cydones, the fact that Christ's representative repeats the name *ho Ōn* proves that Moses saw an angel, not Christ, in the light on Mount Tabor. However, Gregory's followers rejected this view, and in the *ho Ōn* inscription, they found a powerful argument to support their line of reasoning. The inscription testifies to God's immanence in Christ's portrait. The halo illuminates the face of God, once hidden from Moses but now revealed to human eyes.

In 1368 Gregory Palamas was canonized under Patriarch Philotheus Kokkinos[65]. The Church's acceptance of Palamite theology guaranteed the *ho Ōn*'s longevity, but its remarkable success is a much broader story. One should also take into consideration the fact that Gregory's views better reflect the liturgy than those of Barlaam. Indeed, the focus of the liturgical texts and homilies surveyed in section 2 above reinforced Gregory's contention that God can be apprehended in the light of Christ's Tabor theophany. In short, when worshipers looked up at the Christ Pantocrator, the "Ruler of All," hanging in the dome, or when they looked at the many icons which included this inscription, they could have seen a God who "contains the whole of being in himself," not by standing outside of Creation but by entering the world through light.

THE *HO ŌN*'S POST-BYZANTINE RECEPTION

The Hesychast sense of the *ho Ōn* was quickly lost in the Post-Byzantine world. This final section surveys a range of authors who commented on the label. Their readings of the inscription should be kept distinct from what fourteenth-century viewers would have seen.

In the late fifteenth century the *ho Ōn* was glossed in the Greek workbook of Timofei Veniaminov, a teacher at Kirillo-Belozerskii Monastery in northern Russia. Veniaminov made no mention of the ensemble of light, simply writing: "'The One who is' in Greek is ὁ ὤν."[66] In contemporary Slavonic liturgical commentaries the name was *contrasted to* rather than *identified with* Christ's titles. Speaking of the inscription above Christ's head on the Cross ("Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," Jn 19:19), one author juxtaposed it to Aaron's embroidered robes, inscribed with the "laws" of the God who, in darkness, "revealed his name, saying, 'I am the One who is'."[67] The author of this commentary was echoing Cosmas Indicopleustes who described a seal on Aaron's diadem displaying "the engraved letters which compose the name of God, which in Hebrew forms the *tetra-*

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[64] See *De essentia et operatione* 6.13 (ed. M. CANDAL, El libro VI de Prócoro Cidonio: sobre la luz tabórico. *OCP* 20 [1954] 247–297, at 274).

[65] See D. M. NICOL, The Reluctant Emperor: A Biography of John Cantacuzene, Byzantine Emperor and Monk, c. 1295–1383. Cambridge 1996, 90–92, 143–145. For background, see A. RIGO, Il Monte Athos e la controversia palamitica dal Concilio del 1351 al tomo sinodale del 1368: Gregorio Trikanas, Procoro Cidone e Filoteo Kokkinos, in: Gregorio Palamas e oltre: studi e documenti sulle controversie teologiche del XIV secolo bizantino, ed. idem. (*Orientalia Venetiana* 16). Florence 2004, 1–51.

[66] See R. ROMANCHUK, Once Again on the Greek Workbook of Timofei Veniaminov, Fifteenth-Century Novgorod Monk, in: Monastic Traditions: Selected Proceedings of The Fourth International Hilandar Conference (The Ohio State University, 14–15 August 1998), ed. C. E. Gribble – P. Matejic. Bloomington 2003, 264–303, at 282.

[67] See T. I. AFANAS'EVA, Drevneslavianskie tolkovaniia na liturgiiu v rukopisnoi traditsii XII–XVI vv.: issledovanie i teksty. Moscow 2012, 358, 146–154 (commentary).

grammaton."[68] One illuminated *Christian Topography* from Novgorod portrays Aaron wearing a diadem "on which is inscribed the divine name," as the rubric beside him states[69]. Remarkably, here Aaron's *ho Ōn* diadem serves as a counterpoint to the inscription above Christ's head on the Cross—a space that is, tellingly, adjacent to his halo.

The earliest commentary on the inscription appears in a cyclical letter by Maksim Grek (d. 1556). Born into a noble family in Epirus, Greece, Maksim studied on Corfu under John Lascaris. After a decade in Italy and another ten years at Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos, in 1516 the Greek monk was called to Moscow to help with translating the Psalter into Slavonic.

In a letter to an unidentified recipient Maksim addresses the *ho Ōn* in Christ's halo:

> "You should know that this epithet is Hellenic, that is, Greek, and that in Russian it means 'the One who is,' and that 'the One who is' means 'I am,' or 'who exists.' The Pantocrator called himself by this name to Moses when he sent him into Egypt, saying to him: 'You shall say to the sons of Israel, Ὁ ὬΝ, which is to say, 'the One who is' has sent you.' (Ex 3:14). Thus, he called himself the Most High because he alone is by nature a substance, having neither a beginning nor an end, embracing in himself everything that is—the past, present and future—and thus he is called the everlasting. And all of his other works, both seen and unseen, by him and through his grace have being, life, movement, and endurance. But he himself neither descended from another thing, nor did he receive being, but by himself eternally was, is, and will be for unending generations (see Rev 1:8), without beginning, immortal, and without end, by nature life for things living and substance for things existing. And angels and the souls of humans come to be through his grace, not creating themselves but having their immortality from him."[70]

Maksim here returns to the metaphors of Gregory of Nazianzus and Pseudo-Dionysius, claiming the name means that "God contains the whole of being [*vse ezhe byti ... ob''em'' imat'*]." Stressing the omnipresence of God in time, he also follows Gregory of Nazianzus who quoted the famous saying in Revelations 1:8 that God "was, is and will be."[71] But while Maksim revisits the same patristic texts as Gregory Palamas and Barlaam, he shows no interest in the halo's light, and he is more concerned overall with the temporal rather than the substantive dimension of the name. In this respect, it is notable that he does not hesitate to gloss "being" (*syi*) as "substance" (*sushch'*), even though Gregory Palamas would have avoided this conflation. In short, by the early sixteenth century the inscription's Hesychast meaning seems to have been forgotten.

Post-Byzantine painters' manuals pushed the *ho Ōn* in yet another direction[72]. In his celebrated *Hermeneia*, Dionysius of Fourna (d. 1744) instructs artists to write this inscription on all three angels of the Old Testament Trinity[73]. Dionysius's injunction effectively identified this name with the theophany to Abraham, not Moses, and it increased the inscription's trinitarian valence. Intriguingly, painters such as Theophanes the Greek had written the *ho Ōn* only on the central angel

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[68] *Topographia Christiana* 5.49, ll. 6–9 (ed. W. Wolska-Conus, Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie chrétienne [*SC* 159]. Paris 1970, II 81).

[69] Moscow, Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia biblioteka, fond 173 (sobr. Moskovskoi dukhovnoi akademii), MS 102, f. 71ʳ (ca. 1530s); N. P. Likhachev, Materialy dlia istorii russkogo ikonopisaniia: Atlas. St. Petersburg 1906, II, 2: pl. 404, fig. 832.

[70] Sochineniia prepodobnogo Maksima Greka. Kazan' 1859–1860, III 115–117 (item 15); O. V. Čumičeva, Massimo il Greco sull'iconografia. *Studi Slavistici* 7 (2010) 385–394, at 387.

[71] *Or.* 38.7 (114 Moreschini).

[72] See, on these painters' manuals, O. A. Belobrova, Podlinnik ikonopisnyi, in: Slovar' knizhnikov i knizhnosti Drevnei Rusi, ed. D. S. Likhachev. Leningrad/St. Petersburg 1987–2017, II, pt. 2 294–296.

[73] A. Papadopoulou-Kerameus, Dionysiou tou ek Phournā hermeneia tēs zōgraphikēs technēs. St. Petersburg 1909, 227; P. Hetherington, The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fourna. London 1974, 88.

because it alone was given an incuse cross halo and was identified as Christ (**Fig. 7**)[74]. However, Dionysius himself expressed doubt about the Orthodoxy of his rule. In a letter dated October 24, 1727, Anastasius Gordius, with whom Dionysius corresponded on points of iconography, responded to his inquiry about "whether it is appropriate or necessary to adorn [the angels'] nimbi with the letters ὁ ὤν which are often written in the nimbus of the Lord."[75] Anastasius replied that he had never before seen this done, but added that if Dionysius's collection of master drawings (*anthivola*) showed it written this way, then it must be correct.

Figure 7: Theophanes the Greek, Central Angel of the Trinity, ca. 1378. Fresco. Novgorod, Church of the Trans-figuration
(Photo after Lifshits, Monumental'naia zhivopis' Novgoroda XIV–XV vekov. 1987, fig. 24)

Dionysius's injunction was repeated in a Bulgarian painter's manual published in 1863 by the Pazardzhik iconographer Kostadin Angelov. Said to have been translated from the Slavonic by Varban Kolarov, the text derives in large part from Dionysius's manual[76]. Discussing the *ho Ōn* at the entry for the 'Trinity,' Kolarov observes that "in Slavonic [*slavenski*], OꙞOH means 'was and is' [*bil i biva*]," and he cites the passage from Ex 3:14: "I am the One who is" (*az esm sii*). Finally, he tells iconographers how to write the letters on the incuse cross: "You should write O on the left, ꙞꙞ over the middle, and H on the right."[77] Curiously, Kolarov blurs the line between Greek and Slavonic: the *nu* is transcribed as the Cyrillic H (*nash*), and the *omega* is written as a double *omicron* ꙞꙞ. This hybridity is mirrored in Kolarov's assertion that "in Slavonic" the letters mean "I am the One who is"—a gloss which he cites from the Slavonic Bible which naturally does not have

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[74] Vzdornov, *Freski* 189–199.

[75] K. Th. Demaras, Theophanous tou ex Agraphōn bios Dionysiou tou ek Phournā. *Hellenika* 10 (1938) 213–72, at 258–59; G. Kakavas, Dionysios of Fourna: Artistic Creation and Literary Description. Leiden 2009, 84–85 (translation slightly revised).

[76] A. Vasiliev, Ikonografski narŭchnik: preveden ot slavianski na govorim bŭlgarski ezik ot Vŭrban Gŭrdev Kolarov prez 1863 g. Sofia 1977, 64.

[77] I have reversed the directions, which Kolarov, as Dionysius, gives from the icon's perspective, not that of the viewer.

the Greek-ish letters he is explaining. In closing, he repeats Dionysius's recommendation to write the letters in an arc around the angels' faces.

In Russian icon painting the *omega*'s diacritics were transformed into a *tau* superscript[78]. This rewriting led viewers to read the Greek letter as the Cyrillic *ot*, spawning creative reinterpretations. One of them was recorded by the theologian and priest Pavel Florenskii, who lamented that village priests ignorant of Greek "mythologize" the script, interpreting the *ho Ōn* as an acrostic: "Он Отец Наш" (*on otets nash*), or "He is Our Father."[79] This gloss was actually rather clever because *on*, *ot* and *nash* are also the Cyrillic names for the three letters in question (О, От, Н). Through a pun, these parish priests were grafting the *ho Ōn* into the Slavonic alphabet, but it is still a curious gloss since this label was reserved for Christ, not the Father.

In 1869 another acrostic was published in the *Stroganov Patternbook*: "Each [letter] witnesses respectively to God's divinity, humanity, and saving passion. 'Ѿ means that I came down *from* [*ot*] heaven, Ȏ that they [*oni*] did not know me, and Н that I was crucified *on* [*na*] the Cross'."[80] The last phrase in this sequence can be traced back to the 1637 Moscow *azbuka* which glosses the letter *nash* as: "On the Cross they crucified me" (*na kreste propiasha menia*)[81]. The *Stroganov* acrostic also appears in a seventeenth-century grammar under the heading "Greek *omega* / Russian *ot''*," where it is combined with Maksim Grek's aforementioned commentary, resulting in a perplexing medley of interpretations[82]. Citing this and other fanciful acrostics, Nikolai Pokrovskii has pointed out that they transform the *ho Ōn* into a biography of Christ's life: Christ came down from heaven, was rejected by many, and finally was crucified. Calling all of these explanations "artificial interpretations," Pokrovskii observes that "there is neither technical precision nor practical sense" if the Greek is taken into consideration. (Oddly, the *Stroganov* reading begins not with the letter *on* but with *ot*.)[83] Rather than importing Greek into Cyrillic, these authors transform the letters into a Slavonic mnemonic, some of which are based on grammar books[84].

In all, this survey of the *ho Ōn*'s reception shows that little of its Hesychast meaning survived the fifteenth century. Whereas Maksim at least quoted the same patristic texts as Hesychasts and their opponents, later authors only took up this inscription in discussions of the Trinity icon. However, in Byzantium, this inscription was not linked to any specific iconography but rather to Christ's portrait, and it was specifically associated with the feast of Christ's transfiguration. It is notable in this respect that later expositors give so little attention to the light of Christ's halo, because that would have been a key aspect of the ensemble for fourteenth-century viewers. Indeed,

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[78] See, on this hybridity, T. DAIBER, Aufschriften auf russischen Ikonen (*Monumenta linguae slavicae dialecti veteris* 37). Freiburg 1997, 74.

[79] P. FLORENSKII, Iz bogoslovskogo naslediia. *Bogoslovskie trudy* 17 (1977) 85–248, at 113.

[80] A. I. USPENSKII – S. T. BOL'SHAKOV, Podlinnik ikonopisnyi. Moscow 1903, I 24; G. MELNICK, An Icon Painter's Notebook: The Bolshakov Edition (An Anthology of Source Materials). Torrance 1995, 44. The text also includes a second gloss: *otecheskii, oum'', nepostizhim''*, which was reprinted in I. Ia. KRASNITSKII, Skazanie o nachertanii obraza Bozhiei materi Odigitrii. *Izograf: zhurnal ikonografii i drevnikh khudozhestv* (July 1882), section 3 (unpaginated).

[81] V. F. BURTSOV, Bukvar' iazyka slavenska. Moscow 1637, 56ʳ.

[82] St. Petersburg, Rossiiskaia natsional'naia biblioteka, fond 588 (sobr. Pogodina), MS 1655, ff. 145ʳ–146ʳ (late 17th c.). The author takes Ȏ as the first letter of the pronoun 'oni,' or 'they,' in "they did not know me." The comment is introduced at f. 130ʳ⁻ᵛ and f. 131ᵛ at the entry for 'syi' (being).

[83] POKROVSKII, Evangelie 357.

[84] The Greek has also been read as a mnemonic by V. N. ZALESSKAIA, Dva obrazka-enkolpiia paleologovskogo vremeni: (iz novykh postuplenii vizantiiskogo otdeleniia Ermitzha). *VV* 55 (1998) 227–231, at 228. Zalesskaia calls the letters a "truism," which she here transcribes as ὅδε ὦδε ἤδη (sic), but as ὅδε ὡδε ἡδη (sic) in another publication: Dve redkie vizantiiskie bogorodichnye ikonki v sobranii Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, in: Vizantiiskii mir: iskusstvo Konstantinopolia i natsional'nye traditsii (k 2000-letiiu khristianstva), ed. M. A. Orlova. Moscow 2005, 515–522, at 521. Zalesskaia translates both of these phrases as *Аз есмъ сый* (Ex 3:14), but it is not clear how she extracts this from the Greek, which lacks any clear sense. Moreover, it seems that Zalesskaia has mistaken the ν for η, probably because the capital *eta* looks identical to the Cyrillic *nash'*.

for them, the name was linked to God's fulfillment of his promise to Moses at the Burning Bush. God had finally revealed his face, which he had hidden from the prophet when he gave him this name. The light of Christ's halo unveiled the face of God.

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