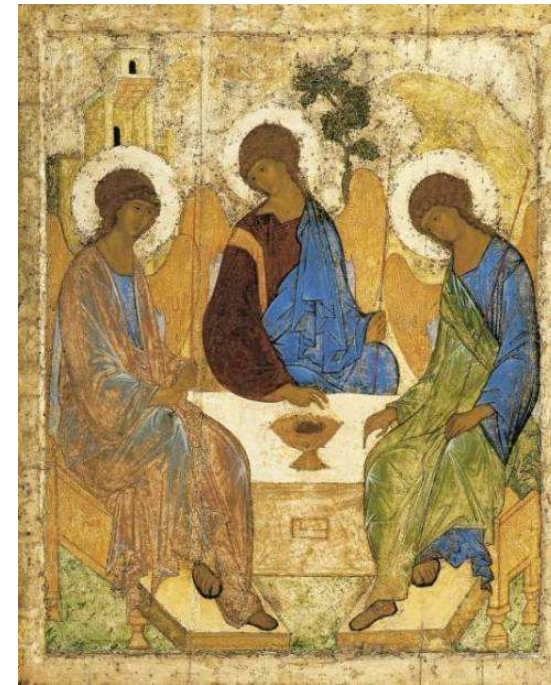



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WHO ARE REPRESENTED ON THE RUBLEV ICON "HOLY TRINITY"?
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**Holy Trinity. St. Andrey Rublev,
1420-th. Tretjakovsky gallery.**



Four hypothesis:

I. Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are directly represented on the Rublev icon: the God the Father, the God the Son and the God the Holy Spirit.

II. The icon represents Jesus Christ in His divine nature, accompanied by two angels.

III. Three angels are represented as "image and likeness" of Holy Trinity.

IV. Three men are represented showing in themselves the image of the Holy Trinity.

The famous icon "Trinity" of Andrey Rublev is the top of Russian icon-painting, and according to some experts, of all world art. Anyhow, its artistic value is indubitable. But as to the contents, there is no icon of more mysterious.

A simplest (at first sight) question arises: who is depicted on this icon? There are three hypotheses in the research literature about this matter. We will consider arguments *pro and contra*, from supposition about Andrey Rublev world outlook, about that theological program by which he could be guided when he created this icon.

And then we will offer our own, fourth hypothesis.

THE FIRST HYPOTHESIS

Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are directly represented on the icon: the God the Father, the God the Son and the God the Holy Spirit.

Its weakness is obvious. The pupil of icon-painter Feofan-Greek who has been brought up in strict traditions of the Byzantine divinity, Andrey Rublev could not

accept direct representation depicting "the Triune God". Deviation in this question was especially inadmissible: heretics of those days underlined the doctrine of Holy Scripture about invisibility of Deities. On this basis they proved no icons representing the God, can be possible at all.

THE SECOND HYPOTHESIS

The icon represents Jesus Christ in His divine nature, accompanied by two angels.

This hypothesis corresponds to the most traditional interpretation. According to the Bible (Gen. Chapt. 18), Abraham and Sara, living in oak grove Mamre, had been visited by three wanderers. After a meal and announcement about a birth of the son before long, two wanderers have gone to the nearby cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which owing to their extreme depravity were condemned to destruction, and the third guest remained with Abraham. Church historian Eusebius of Cesaria (IV cent.) has described an icon which was in that time near a legendary oak in Mamre. The dinner of three wanderers has been represented with Abraham and Sarra serving to them (from here this image has received the name «hospitality of Abraham»).

Explaining why the size of the central wanderer is larger than two others, Eusebius wrote: «It is the very Lord our Saviour who appeared to us... The Son of God showed Himself to Abraham, and has given knowledge about the Father».

One of the great teachers of church John Chrysostom (the end of IV) confirms this interpretation: «In grove of Abraham both angels and their Lord had appeared together; but then angels as servants, have been sent on the destroying of those cities, and the Lord remained to talk to the righteous person just as the friend talks to the friend, about what He has intended to make».

Arguments in favour of the Hypothesis 2:

a) Andrey Rublev owing to his theological «traditionalism» could not deviate the standard Byzantium canon.

b) The lateral angels are represented as though in readiness for movement (they are going to go to punish Sodom and Gomorrah) whereas the middle angel, unlike them, stays immobile.

c) Central light strip, so-called «clav», on a tunic of the central character - the sign of his special dignity distinguishing Jesus Christ from angels.

Objections against arguments in favour of the Hypothesis 2:

a) Andrey Rublev, not leaving the limits of the Byzantine tradition, has managed to fill it with new semantic contents.

"The icon "Trinity" sharply differs from previous monuments, - Rublev researcher G.I.Vzdornov asserts. - It has the polemic contents and, undoubtedly, has been directed against heretical interpretation of a trinity dogma».

This statement is true only partly. It is known, that Rublev in his theological "innovations" leant against authority of Sergius of Radonezh, who was named by his biographer as «spectator of

mysteries of the Holy Trinity». The Trinity image on the main "seal" of an icon "Archangel Michael with deeds" (10-15 years before Roublev "Trinity") convinces that the trend of spiritual search has been already set. Roublev completes this plan with genius perfection.

b) M.V.Alpatov has noticed, the central angel is not distinguished in sense of absence of movement: his right knee is raised, that is, as well as lateral angels, he is ready to rise. The harmonious combination of rest and movement is characteristic for all three figures and for an icon composition as a whole.

c) Despite the some obliterated image, on a tunic of the right angel also is seen the clav of green colour. However, on the left sleeve, instead of right, as the average angel has.

Additional objections against the Hypothesis 2:

d) Abraham and Sara are absent on the icon. So the painter lets know, that the contents is not close connected with a Bible episode of "hospitality of Abraham».

e) If the average angel represented Jesus Christ, His nimbus according to tradition would be octagonal or cross-shaped. A simple round nimbus is usual for images of angels or saints.

f) The nimbus of an central angel is visibly less, than such of lateral angels, that obviously contradicts the assumption of its higher hierarchical position. The art-critic A.A.Saltykov supposes: the reduced size of a nimbus of an central angel is used for creation of impression of "depth" and, hence, dignity of personage. But on Andrey Roublev icon it is applied, according to icon tradition of epoch, not direct but the inverse perspective: the remote subjects are represented more big than close ones. If the icon-painter wished to make impression of "depth" for an average personage, he would make the nimbus larger! Besides he would underline Jesus Christ superiority over angels.

THE THIRD HYPOTHESIS

On the icon three angels are represented as "image and likeness" of Holy Trinity.

The majority of church theologians and some of art critics adheres to this hypothesis. As writes, for example, A.A.Saltykov:

"In this product the artist has represented, of course, not Hypostasis, but angels, in whose actions and attributes they (hypostasis) manifest themselves".

Arguments in favour of a hypothesis 3:

a) The main theology-polemic task of Roublev consisted in the visual image of the «equal-dignity» of three Persons of the Holy Trinity; it is possible only if all three characters on the icon are beings of the same nature, in this case - angelic.

In early iconography of Trinity the equal-dignity was expressed in so-called «isocéfalic» type of icons, widespread in the West from IV century. According to this task three figures had the identical sizes and have been located at one level. Roublev expresses the idea of equal-dignity by the identical sizes and a spherical-symmetric arrangement of characters.

b) The angelic nature of figures on an icon is designated by wings and round simple nimbi.

c) "Unconnection" of the image with Bible episode allows to change an arrangement of the figures, symbolising the Persons of Holy Trinity. The middle angel can be understood as an image of God the Father: his central position corresponds to the theological doctrine about Holy Trinity as "council of equal-dignity persons" and at the same time as "monarchy of the Father". To such point of view was adhered, for example, so authoritative art-critic, as N.A.Demina.

However the majority of researchers (V.N.Lazarev, etc.) consider, that Roublev has arranged the image of the Father to the left of us, i.e. to the right of the central figure symbolising the Son. A decisive argument: imperative gesture of a hand of the left angel, expressing idea of "monarchy of the Father".

His own variant of an identification of Persons was offered by archbishop Sergius (Golubzov) who has underlined, that, according to the Creed, the Son should sit to the right of Father. If in the centre the image of the Son is located, the angel symbolising the Father, should sit down to the left of His, to the right of us.

Objections against the Hypothesis 3:

a) In the days of Roublev there was no steady church tradition giving prominence to three angels, equal in their significance. In divine service and Bible texts, in iconography and church legends are clearly selected only two highest archangels - Michael and Gabriel. It is impossible to put with them abreast any third angelic name. Considering original "concreteness" of theological thinking in that epoch, it is difficult to present, that Roublev, representing three angels as the image of Holy Trinity, has not asked a question - which specific angels can serve as symbols of Divine Persons? In this connection a question of principle was inevitably emerged: whether a council of any three angels could be the image of Holy Trinity? Speech could go, of course, not about completeness of an image in sense of perfection (any «creature of God», neither the man, nor angels could not claim this), but only in sense of the internal structure, the very principle of triunity.

b) The wings in iconography of that epoch cannot be considered as unequivocal indication of the angelic nature. So, among Byzantine and Russian icons of XIV-XV centuries we can meet a plot «John Baptist - the angel of desert» where prophet John is represented with wings. On some icons (in particular, on an icon "the Judgement Day" or "Apocalypse") the holy monks are often represented with wings. Thus, the wings in iconography are a general symbol of spirituality, they can belong both to angels, and saints.

c) By any way of an identification of persons it still remains not clearly the reduced size of a nimbus of an central angel. Let it be the image of the Son or, especially, of the Father, such his "belittling" in comparison with two other angels would be justified by nothing.



d) The bowl with a head of calf - it is unconditional the symbol of Eucharist, i.e. "communion of the blood and body" of Jesus Christ as Man. If Andrey Roublev wished to represent angels it is not clear why he underlines the eucharistic sense of a meal. Within the limits of church tradition the thought about communion of angels of a flesh and blood of Jesus Christ is absolutely inadmissible because the angels themselves have not the flesh and blood. Certainly, in the Bible description of

Hospitality of Abraham. Mosaic
532-547. Church the St-Vitale,
Ravenna, detail.

"hospitality of Abraham» it is underlined, that wanderers ate and drank, but in this episode the angelic nature of wanderers is not expressed clearly.

In the Bible text it is said, that to Abraham «three man» came, so Abraham has not a doubt, that they are three men for whom it is necessary to prepare a meal. In other episode the inhabitants of Sodom do not identify angels in two wanderers and accept they are ordinary people. Only thanks to a prophetic enlightenment Abraham comprehends, that it was the Lord accompanied by two angels who have accepted a human likeness: some legends assert, that they were Michael and Gabriel. One of possibilities of theological understanding of this episode consisted that angels "were temporarily moved" into some concrete people living at Abraham days.

As all the proposed hypotheses meet serious objections, we dare to suggest one more, and we will try to prove this.

THE FOURTH HYPOTHESIS

On icon of Andrey Rublev three men are represented showing in themselves the image of the Holy Trinity.

Arguments in favour of the Hypothesis 4:

a) According to texts of the Scripture and the Church doctrine, among all the created beings the completeness of an image of God belongs exclusively to the man.

"And God said, - the Bible narrates, - let us make man in our image, after our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him." Gen. 1:26-27.

About angels another's words were spoken:

"But to which of the angels said he at any time, sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool? Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" Hebr.1:14.

According to the doctrine of church fathers, the God, wishing to unite with His creation, became the Man, but not the angel just because only the Man bears in himself the completeness of the God image and he is "the wreath of creation".

Quite reliably to assume that for Andrey Rublev three men who find the unity in spiritual love, were the most perfect and full image of the Trinity Hypostatic Unity. One of the major texts of New Testament should convince him in this - so-called «the first priest pray» of Jesus Christ during "Last Supper" where He commits and communicates pupils the Eucharist for the first time (Jn. Chapt. 13 - 17).

After appealing to Father with words:

"Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee",

Jesus begs the Father about pupils:

"that they also may be one in Us". Jn. 17:21-22.

Rublev icon served, thus, as visible expression of God definition in New Testament:

"God is Love" 1 Jn. 4:8.

b) Epiphany the Wise, the biographer of Sergius of Radonezh, wrote, that Sergius called: "by looking at unity of the Holy Trinity to overcome the fear before the hated discord of this world". The unity of the Holy Trinity was for Sergius the symbol of collecting together all the people of Russian land. The same Epiphany indicates, that Andrey Rublev has pictured this glorified icon "Trinity" "to Sergius praise", by request of abbot Nikon, the nearest pupil of Sergius. It is possible to assert, that in a circle of Saint Sergius there were shaped own kind of thinking, original style of theology, and that Andrey Rublev has expressed in language of an icon the theological program which has developed in this circle. The human love, human conciliatory unity - the highest embodiment of the Holy Trinity, should lend Sergius preaching the particular inspiration and effectiveness.

c) The eucharistic bowl forming the spiritual and compositional centre of an icon, gets a natural explanation. Representing the personal unity in love, Rublev supplements this spiritual unity with symbolical corporal unity, reached through Communion. Thanks to the Communion, apostle Paul asserts: "we, being many, are one body in Christ". Rome 12:5.

It is known so-called "zyrjanski" icon of Trinity of the end of XIV. This icon has unique theological contents, with a number of signs, characteristic for Rublev icon: three figures have the identical sizes; the eucharistic bowl on the table; the tree is located directly behind central figure, instead of grows from mountain, as usually. Besides, this icon has two remarkable features.

Each of figures has cross-shaped nimbus, and each is supplied by an zyrjanski inscription: central - "father", right-hand of it - "son", left-hand - "spirit"! Similarity of nimbi indicates identity of nature of three represented persons. Because the cross-shaped nimbus by tradition signified Jesus Christ as the Man, it is possible to draw a conclusion, "father" and "spirit" - others two men, "equal-dignity" with Him! Such a meaning is underlined by the inscriptions "father", "son" and "spirit" instead of usual «the God the Father», «the Son Divine» and "Holy Spirit".

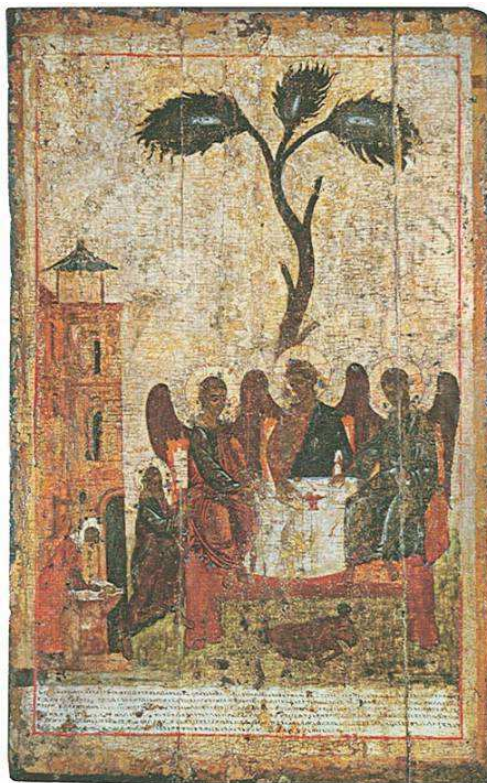
This icon is not an art masterpiece, but has a great significance: it was created in region where at that time dwelled bishop Stefan of Perm, well-known "zyrjan educator", the nearest associate and friend of Sergius. The icon is found among Stefan things and, certainly, had written by him or by his order. It is possible to assert with certain confidence, that the author of "Zyrjansky Trinity", as well as Andrey Rublev, was guided by theological ideas of Sergius.

e) Working together with Daniel Chernyi ("Black") in 1408 by painting of the Vladimir Uspensky cathedral, Andrey Rublev has possibility to get acquainted with a fresco of the Vladimir Dmitrovsky cathedral of end XII: "Abraham, Isaac, Jacob in paradise". On this fresco Abraham sit in the centre, on his right-hand Isaac, on left-hand Iakov who has become, according to the Bible, the ancestor of twelve knees of Israel.

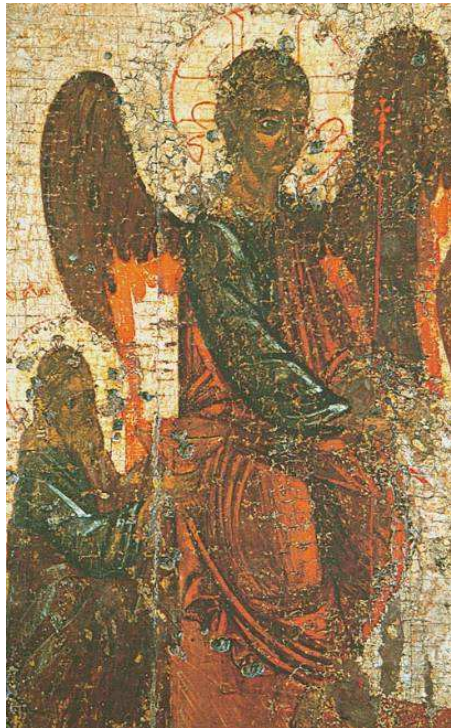
Daniel and Andrey, repeating this fresco, change the succession of figures: to the right of Isaac - Jacob, so everyone appears to the right of his own father. The Bible often uses God name as "the



Monks with wings. Last Judgment.
Novgorod XV



Trinity Zyrjansky, early XIV. supposed author: St. Stephan of Perm



Trinity Zyrjansky, fragment

God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob": teachers of church pointed to this name as the proof of God triune. So this image brought the important theological meaning: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob - three persons showing the image of the Holy Trinity.

The central position of Abraham on fresco of the Dmitrovsky cathedral corresponded to the basic idea of the orthodox doctrine about God the Father as a "source" of the Holy Trinity: the Father "begets" the Son, the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father. The arrangement of figures on Daniel and Roublev fresco underlines other theological doctrine: the Son "sits on right-hand of Father". Both these statements are expressed in Nicene Creed which believers repeat during each liturgy.

Development of the Hypothesis 4:

If on Roublev icon three persons are depicted, a question inevitably emerges: whether three saint man in general or three concrete persons are represented here? In attempt to answer this question we enter area of assumptions of the most disputable, but at the same time the most interesting and important...

Our assumption consists that Andrey Roublev has represented three persons whom he should consider as the highest in hierarchy of human hypostasis. Existence of such hierarchy could not cause doubts for the theologues of that epoch.

There is one glory of the sun, - apostle Paul wrote, - and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory... And so it is written, the first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickened spirit... The first man is of the earth, earthly; the second man is the Lord from heaven". 1 Cor. 15:41...47

This text could become decisive for Andrey Roublev.

Thus «the first man» - forefather Adam who, undoubtedly, among all mankind had the greatest bases to considering him as image of God the Father. "The second man", "the Lord from sky" is, of course, Jesus Christ Who, in agreement with Christology dogma, being the God, became the prototype of Himself as man. Who then "the third man" - "the last Adam"? We will slow in answering to this question - to consider at first a theme "Adam-Jesus" in context of Roublev icon. The parallel between "the earth man" Adam and "the new man" Jesus often meets in New Testament texts, in dogmatic and liturgical texts, in writings of fathers and in church chanting.

The Man Jesus Christ is represented in iconography close by Adam in a plot very important and widespread in the Middle Ages - on icon of "Christ resurrection" or "descent into hell". The first action of Jesus Christ after He has broken "a hell gate" - He led out His forefather Adam (together with Eve and a number of ancient righteous). In those days there was an usual opinion, that this meant also corporal resurrection together with the Christ. Adam and Eve though had sinned, but were considered as righteous persons in view of their sincere repentance. This opinion was confirmed by the text from the Matthew gospel, describing events after death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

"And the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose". Mt. 27:52-5.

According to the medieval legend, the mountain Golgotha on which Jesus had been crucified, was a place of Adam burial. This is expressed in widespread plot: a head (skull) of Adam under Golgotha cross. According to the church legend, Jesus blood drops, being absorbed in the earth, have reached Adam's bones and have revived him. As well as all his contemporaries, certainly trusting this legend, Andrey Rublyov should imagine Adam already expiated from a sin, had bodily revived and staying on heavens near God throne.

Thus Andrey Roublev had enough base in church tradition to put nearby (more precisely, to seat at one table) Jesus and Adam. The parallel drawn in the New Testament between these two persons specified on their human "equal-dignity" in sense of "rank" in hierarchy of mankind. Certainly, Jesus Christ "in His deity" was thought as infinitely surpassed not only Adam, but also Himself as Man. Jesus and Adam are represented on the icon in the revived bodies with the wings as symbol of the spiritualised nature. Probably, depicting wings, Roublev meant also the text of the Lukas gospel about the resurrected people:

"Neither can they die any more; for they are equal unto the angels..." Lk. 20:36.

The offered interpretation allows to give an easy explanation to a number of symbols in Roublev icon.

Additional arguments in favour of the Hypothesis 4:

a) The reduced nimbus over Adam head serves as a reminder about original sin; it is as though "compensation" of central Adam position. Certainly, here the image of the relation of God the Father to God the Son is shown, and Jesus, according to the legend, rendered filial respect even to foster-father Joseph, and especially to forefather Adam... And at the same time for the christian consciousness of Roublev it should seem obvious the necessity somehow to "belittle" Adam before Jesus.

b) Stone chambers over Jesus head symbolise church and Him as "house-builder" of church. Some researchers see in an arrangement of columns the anagramme IH, i. e. Jesus Nazorey - this name underlines, that here Jesus is represented as the man, but not as the God.

c) The tree over Adam head, most likely, reflects a favourite plot of Russian icon-painters of that epoch: "tree of Jesse". In the tree basis Adam was represented always, on its branches - the old righteous persons. Sometimes "tree of Jesse" was thought as the family tree of Jesus which proceeded from Adam. Probably also, that it simultaneously is a symbol "paradise tree of life", which also connected directly with Adam.

d) The explanation of colour symbolics of the icon may be given. Reddish-brown colour of Adam tunic symbolises the "earth dust" from which, according to the Bible, the God has created Adam: "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Gen. 2:7.

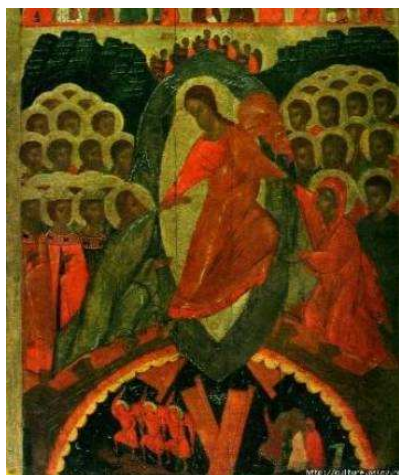
The name of Adam was often translated from Hebrew as «the red earth», it could be the basis for a choice of Adam tunic colouring. Clav on the right sleeve of the tunic, having the same colour as wings, probably indicates on the "life breath", which has spiritualized "the earth dust".



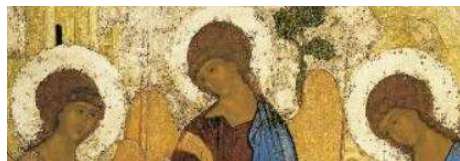
Abraham, Isaac, Jacob in paradise.
Andrey Roublev and Daniel Chernyi.
Fresco, XIV, Vladimir, Uspensky
cathedral.

Blue colour of Jesus tunic symbolises His human nature as the nature of «new man». According to the church doctrine, Jesus-Man is the descendant ("son") of Adam through mother; at the same time, being conceived «not from a seed of the husband», but from Holy Spirit, Jesus was thought as the ancestor of "new mankind" into which Adam sons are included by means of a communion «to body and blood» of Jesus Christ. Jesus origin from Adam is symbolised by colour of a sacrificial calf (this calf is Jesus Christ as the Victim), coinciding with colour of the Adam tunic. Blue colour of Adam's outer clothing points to his participation through communion to «new mankind» of Jesus Christ. Golden colour of Jesus outer clothing symbolises His divine nature: according to the Chalkidon dogma, Jesus Christ was understood not simply as the Man, but as the God who, remaining the God, became as well the Man.

We still have the most difficult: to give interpretation to the third person represented on an Rublev icon "Holy Trinity". But it is a theme of other article: "Archangel and Prince Michael in Russian icons".



Descendant into hell. Early XV, the Pskov school



Tree nimbi



Trinity in circle

ARCHANGEL MICHAEL
AND HOLY TRINITY

