

**Theotokos of the Unburnt Bush: An Interpretation**

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Figure 1. Theotokos of the Unburnt Bush, Icon #2012.81

# Theotokos of the Unburnt Bush: An Interpretation

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## The Origin of the Icon

The icon of the Mother of God of the Unburnt Bush is an ancient one that is widely venerated in Russia, and is popularly believed to offer protection against fire. Its significance, however, is far deeper and more expansive, and this beautiful, complex, yet unified icon is in fact a theological reflection on the position of the Mother of God in the economy of salvation.

According to legend, the icon was thought to have originated at the Monastery of Saint Catherine, in the Sinai Desert, one of the oldest extant Christian monasteries, where its prototype was depicted on the stone of the rock where God appeared to Moses from the mysterious burning bush (Exodus 3: 1-15). Its feast day is celebrated on September 4, together with the memory of the prophet Moses.<sup>1</sup>

Christian monastic life began in the desert, in the region around Mount Sinai, where as early as the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, men and women left the world to live as hermits in the desert, seeking God without distraction and practicing the ascetic life. Saint Anthony of Egypt, regarded as the father of monasticism, retreated into Egypt's Eastern Desert, and word of his holiness inspired many others to cast off their worldly possessions and to join him at the foot of Mount Sinai, and at nearby mountains, to seek sanctity by leading lives of strict spiritual and physical discipline. This eventually led to the development of small communities where anchorites lived in caves, stone cells or huts and spent their days as solitaries in silence and prayer, particularly around Mount Horeb, which was believed to be the site where God appeared to the prophet Moses in the Burning Bush. This trend intensified after the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Constantine's Edict of Milan (303 AD) put an end to persecutions, and many Christians turned to lives of extreme hardship in the wilderness as alternatives to physical martyrdom.

According to tradition, in 330 AD, in response to a request by the monks living in that region, the Byzantine empress Helena (Saint Helen), mother of Emperor Constantine, ordered the building of a small church, dedicated to the Mother of God, at the site of the Burning Bush, as well as a fortified enclosure where the hermits could seek refuge from the attacks of marauding tribes of nomads. Later, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, responding to an appeal from the growing population of hermits (now under the authority of the Bishop of Sinai), Emperor Justinian constructed a magnificent church enclosed within walls strong enough to withstand attacks and to protect the monks against nomadic raids, and this is today known as the Monastery of Saint Catherine.<sup>2</sup> The monastery (still active) is supposedly located at the site where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, although this is not universally agreed upon. It does, however, have one of the most extensive collections of early Byzantine icons in the world. It is

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- 1 <http://oca.org/saints/lives/2013/09/04/102500-icon-of-the-mother-of-god-the-unburnt-bush> (Orthodox Church of America)
  - 2 Figure 2. Image sources (left): [http://4.bp.blogspot.com/\\_RTd22U9tNjg/SwHRJ2mZTVI/AAAAAAAAABxl/1MCrI5G2VYU/s1600/StCatherinesMonasterySinai800hH.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_RTd22U9tNjg/SwHRJ2mZTVI/AAAAAAAAABxl/1MCrI5G2VYU/s1600/StCatherinesMonasterySinai800hH.jpg); (right) <http://www.escapeartistes.com/2012/03/19/in-the-footsteps-of-moses-saint-catherines-and-mount-sinai/>.

Figure 2. The Monastery of Saint Catherine in the Sinai Desert.<sup>2</sup>

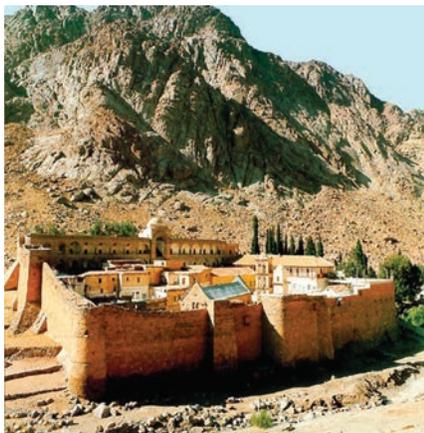




Figure 3. The bush, a type of bramble (*rubus sanctus*) traditionally believed to be where God appeared to Moses in the form of fire, is located at Saint Catherine's Monastery in Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

here that legend places the origin of the holy icon, where its image is supposed to have been depicted on the rock adjacent to the bush where God revealed himself to Moses.<sup>3</sup>

The putative connection of the icon to the monastery is not surprising: the most ancient and sacred part of the monastery is the Chapel of the Holy Bush, whose existence was mentioned by a woman named Egeria<sup>4</sup>, from what is now Galicia in modern Spain, who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land around 381-384, and who wrote about her visit to the monastery and to the chapel in a long letter addressed to a circle of friends at home:

*[T]here were very many cells of holy men there, and a church in the place where the bush is, which same bush is alive to this day and throws out shoots. So having made the whole descent of the mount of God we arrived at the bush about the tenth hour. This is that bush which I mentioned above, out of which the Lord spake in the fire to Moses, and the same is situated at that spot at the head of the valley where there are many cells and a church. There is a very pleasant garden in front of the church, containing excellent and abundant water, and the bush itself is in this garden. The spot is also shown hard by where holy Moses stood when God said to him: "Loose the latchet of thy shoe, and the rest." Now it was about the tenth hour when we had arrived at the place, and so, as it was late, we could not make the oblation, but prayer was made in the church and also at the bush in the garden, and the passage from the book of Moses was read according to custom.<sup>5</sup>*

The monastery's website displays an image of what appears to be an early version of the icon on the rock, as described above (Figure 4).<sup>6</sup> However, no other information as to its age is available. Early Christian scriptural interpretation was characterized by typology, in which events in the Hebrew Scriptures were seen as prefiguring and paralleling corresponding ones in the Christian scriptures. Thus, the unburnt bush was the vehicle by which God's revelation (fire) came into the world without compromising the integrity of the bush, as the Virgin Mary was the vehicle by which God's revelation (Jesus) came into the world without compromising the integrity of her virginity. It seems likely that as theological reflection on Moses and the burning bush as a type, or prefiguring, of the virgin birth deepened, versions of the original icon became progressively more complex until it reached its present form. However, this author is not aware of any research to support this supposition.



Figure 4. The Mother of God of the Unburnt Bush icon type is thought to have originated at the Monastery of Saint Catherine where a prototype is depicted on a rock.<sup>6</sup>

The "Unburnt Bush" icon (known in Russia as *Neopalimaya Kupina*, Неопалимая Купина), is supposed to have reached Russia when one of the most ancient copies was brought to Kievan Rus' from the Sinai by Palestinian monks in 1390. It is supposedly on the altar of the Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Moscow Kremlin.<sup>7</sup> This author does not know the whereabouts of the original icon, or whether it still exists.

3 Figure 2. Image source: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burning\\_Bush,\\_St\\_Catherine%27s\\_Monastery.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Burning_Bush,_St_Catherine%27s_Monastery.jpg). By Dale Gillard [CC-BY-2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

4 Also Aetheria or sometimes Sylvia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egeria\\_%28pilgrim%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egeria_%28pilgrim%29)

5 *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, M.L.McClure and C. L. Feltoe, trans., (1919) The Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge. <http://www.ccel.org/m/mcclure/etheria/etheria.htm>

6 <http://www.sinaimonastery.com/en/?lid=1>

7 <http://cosmoprovodnik.ru/artefakti/ikona-neopalimaya-kupina>

There are several versions of the icon in the Museum's collection (Figure 5), the earliest dating from around 1700 and the most recent from around 1890. All share the same essential elements while differing in details. The icon on which we will focus was written around 1880, and is exceptionally elegant and striking by virtue of its execution and design. One somewhat unique feature is that the identifying text, which in most of the versions appears as blocks of writing in the margins and tends to give them a rather cluttered appearance, in our icon has been confined by the iconographer to a band surrounding the clouds, thus becoming a design element that enhances the clarity and unity of the icon.

The version of the icon that we will focus on here) was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 1 and Figure 5, bottom row, middle). The icon is stunningly beautiful, executed in a striking blend of colors that are both complementary and subtle. Unlike most icons of the Theotokos, where the Mother of God and the Son of God are the only figures, in the Mother of God Unburnt Bush virtually every part of the icon is filled with additional figures, of angels and archangels, evangelists, and Old Testament Patriarchs—in our version, amounting to 21 full figures! Nevertheless, there is no sense of crowding or congestion, because its symmetry and the relation of the figures to one another give it an elegance and harmony that engender in the viewer an air of peace and deep prayerfulness.

Figure 5. Selected icons from the Museum's collection, illustrating similarities, differences, and increasing artistic refinement over time. (top row, left to right): R2000.8, ca.1700; R2010.39, ca.1750; R2006.23, ca.1825. (bottom row left to right): R2007.28, ca.1870; R2012.81, ca.1880; R2000.14, ca. 1890.





Figure 6. Center detail of Theotokos of the Unburnt Bush, Icon #2012.81

## Features of the Icon

At the center of the icon sits the Mother of God, with Jesus supported on her left arm. Their pose is vaguely similar to that of the *Hodigitria* (Mother of God of the Way), as can be seen below from a comparison with the Smolensk Mother of God (15<sup>th</sup> century, from Kinerma in the Pryazha region of the Russian Republic of Karelya)<sup>8</sup> but here she faces away from him, and Mother and Child are both looking downward and to their right.

They are enclosed in a mandorla situated at the center of an eight-pointed star formed by the overlap of two four-sided stars with concave sides, set at 45° to one another, one star red and the other blue or green (blue in our icon). This motif is one that, to this author's knowledge, seems to appear only in icons of Christ in Majesty (*Pantocrator*) and in depictions of the *Paternitas*, and it is intriguing that it is used here. Both the mandorla (a symbol of an opening into heaven) and the number eight—in biblical numerology representing eternity—place the Mother of God at the very presence of God, the center of all truth, around which the entire universe revolves, so that God himself becomes the center of the icon, with everything relating to it as spokes of a wheel to its hub.



Figure 7. Smolensk Mother of God, 15<sup>th</sup> century, from Kinerma in the Pryazha region of the Russian Republic of Karelya.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Mandorla*

The mandorla in the icon is formed by two concentric circles that constitute an encircling band, which is filled with angels in red, reminiscent again of the *Pantocrator* icons. The angels are possibly seraphim, the members of the angelic choir who, according to the vision of the prophet Isaiah, surround the throne of God, singing the *trisagion*, or thrice-holy hymn ("Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of His glory"), and whose red color derives from the name seraphim (singular: seraph), a Hebrew word meaning "fiery ones" or "burning ones". (However, this identification is open to question, since the angels in this icon lack the six wings with which seraphim are described in the bible and customarily depicted iconographically.)

### *The Red Star*

The color of the red star symbolizes the fire of the bush that Moses saw. According to the Eastern Church Fathers, it represents not physical fire but, since the bush was not consumed, the Uncreated Fire (i.e., the presence or manifestation of God). Thus the bush serves as a kind of conduit through which the glory of God is revealed. In its corners are four creatures, each holding a gospel book, serving as symbols of the four evangelists. The inscriptions identify them as:

Matthew = Man    Mark = Eagle  
Luke = Ox        John = Lion

This differs from the more traditional and familiar identification of the symbols:

Matthew = man holding a book = Christ's genealogy;  
Luke = ox = Zachariah sacrificing in the temple;  
Mark = lion = John the Baptist — the voice of one crying in the wilderness;  
John = eagle = "In the beginning was the Word ...",

<sup>8</sup> Figure 8. Image source: <http://33nikoly.ru/CONTENT/1565.JPG>

and is the one given by Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 120-202 AD) in his treatise against heresy.<sup>9</sup> The red color, and the concave points of the star, seeming as they do to issue almost as flames from heaven, depict the gospels as another source of God's self-revelation, God's word, flowing through the evangelists into the world.

### *Green or Blue Star*

The color of the star, when green (this seems to be most common, though in our icon it is blue), has been said to represent the natural color of the bush, but this author is inclined to think it has a broader significance, for two reasons. First, in its corners are four angels. At the top are two angels, one holding clouds, and the other holding what appears to be a vessel perforated with small holes, probably symbolizing rain. In the left point of the star an angel holds two rainbows, while on the right appears an angel with a small person blowing a horn, from which emanate lines likely representing wind. At the bottom of the star stands an angel with its arms spread, and nearby a small object which may be a fire pot or possibly a censer, something clearly visible in other versions of the icon. These angels are identified in some icons as "the lords of the rudiments [i.e., elements] of the world", the inscriptions identifying them as "the angel of thunder and lightning", "the spirit of understanding", "the angel of storm and rain", and "the angel of fire and scorching". The blue color of the star thus suggests the "earthly heavens", or the firmament. By controlling the natural elements of the world, the angels likewise function as God's agents, his power being revealed through them, as his word is revealed through the evangelists, recalling Saint Paul's letter to the Romans (1: 20, "Ever since the creation of the world, [God's] invisible attributes of power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.") Second, while it has also sometimes been suggested that the depiction of spirits that control the earthly powers indicates the incorporation of pagan elements (earth, air, fire and water) into the icon, this interpretation, in this author's opinion, introduces a discordant note that seems to me inconsistent with the unity of the iconographic program.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Clouds**

Surrounding the eight-pointed star are clouds, and within each of their eight octants are Angels and Archangels. The inscriptions in the band surrounding the clouds in this version are obscure and difficult to decipher<sup>11</sup>, so that at this point we must rely on inscriptions from other versions to help identify them, and at present this author is reasonably confident in only a few. The Archangels, "who stand and serve before the Glory of the Lord",<sup>12</sup> are, in the Orthodox tradition, seven in number:<sup>13</sup>

Michael, whose name means "Who is like unto God?",<sup>14</sup> with his rod, symbolizing power to overcome the enemies of God. In our icon, he appears in the lower right octant, clad in armor and carrying a sword.

Gabriel, whose name means "The Strength of God",<sup>15</sup> carrying a branch symbolizing the Annunciation;

Raphael, whose name means "The Healing of God", with an alabastron (a small pottery or glass vessel used to hold oil, especially perfume or massage oils) containing myrrh, representing God's anointing,<sup>16</sup>

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9 Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies. Adversus Haereses*, Book 3 [<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/irenaeus-book3.html>]. "Mark ... commences with [a reference to] the prophetic spirit coming down from on high to men, saying, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is written in Esaias [i.e., Isaiah] the prophet," - pointing to the winged aspect of the Gospel". [See also [http://catholic-resources.org/Art/Evangelists\\_Symbols.htm#Irenaeus](http://catholic-resources.org/Art/Evangelists_Symbols.htm#Irenaeus)]

10 In some sources the angels are said to represent the Spirits of Wisdom, Intellect, Piety, and Fear of the Lord.

11 Consultation with Professor Raoul Smith (Museum of Russian Icons).

12 Book of Tobit, chapter 12, verse 15.

13 In scriptural numerology, the number seven signifies completeness, as God's work of creation was completed in seven days.

14 Book of Daniel, chapter 10, verse 13; chapter 12, verse 1; Jude verse 9; Book of Revelation, chapter 12, verses 7-8

15 Book of Daniel, chapter 8, verse 16; chapter 9, verse 21; Luke, chapter 1, verses 19-26.

16 Book of Tobit, chapter 3, verse 17; chapter 12, verse 15. The book of Tobit is accepted as canonical in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, but not by Protestant churches.



Figure 8. The seven archangels (upper third of the icon)<sup>19</sup>

all three of whom are named directly in sacred scripture. In the Orthodox tradition, there are four other archangels, whose names are known only from tradition and noncanonical sources<sup>17</sup> (i.e., the apocryphal Book of Enoch<sup>18</sup>):

Jehudiel or Jehudiel, whose name means “The Praise of God”, is often portrayed holding a crown and a three-tongued whip; none of the figures in our icon seem to correspond obviously to this.

Raguel (“The Friend of God”) appears in the apocryphal Book of Enoch, where his function is said to be to exact judgment on fallen angels by bringing on them a course of fire. Two of the figures in our icon (top and upper left octants) seem to be holding vessels of fire, though it is unclear whether either can be confidently identified as Raguel.

Selaphiel (“The Prayer of God”) with a *navicula* (a censer in the shape of a boat, as its name, derived from *navis*, the Latin word for boat, indicates). He appears at the bottom right octant.

Uriel (“The Light or Fire of God”), who carries a fiery sword.

The seven archangels appear, along with their names, in a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian icon (Figure 8).<sup>19</sup> However, the lack of distinguishing characteristics does not permit identification of the archangels in our icon. Moreover, the fact that the cloud portion of the icon contains nine angelic figures (two in one octant) suggests that one or more may simply represent generic angels.

Detailed analysis of this aspect of the icon must be left for further study. Nonetheless, the presence of archangels and other angels of power surrounding the central image of the Mother of God underscores her central position in the economy of salvation.

## The Patriarch

Finally, coming to the edges of the icon we see four scenes depicting Old Testament figures receiving their revelation of God. In the context of this icon, they illustrate the principle articulated by Saint Augustine that “the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed”, that is that there is a kind of mirror-image symmetry according to which events into the Old Testament prefigure events in the New, and that true understanding of their meaning and significance only becomes clear when we can look back at them with post-Resurrection eyes.

### Top Left Corner: Moses and the Burning Bush

Here, at last, we finally encounter the burning bush (or more accurately, the unburnt bush) from which the icon takes its common name (Figure 9). Moses is guarding his father-in-law’s sheep in the desert, when



Figure 9. Moses and the Burning Bush. Detail from R2012.81

17 <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Archangel>. Note that not all Christian traditions agree on the names or the numbers.

18 [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Book\\_of\\_Enoch](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Book_of_Enoch).

19 <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e8/Archangels.JPG/840px-Archangels.JPG>. By Anonymous (Immagine scansionata dall'originale) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

*An angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush ... the bush, though on fire, was not consumed ... Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God.<sup>20</sup>*

The early church fathers believed that the burning bush was not a physical phenomenon in which the bush, though on fire, was somehow miraculously protected from the destructive effects of the flame, but rather that what Moses saw as fire was the uncreated energy of God (who, according to Saint John, is light), and that God used the bush as a vehicle or channel through which to reveal himself to Moses, much as he used the evangelists as channels for the light of his truth to pour into the world. They saw in this a prefiguring of the incarnation of Christ, according to which God's presence (Jesus) came into the world through his birth from Mary (John 1:9 — "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world"), who nevertheless remained perpetually virgin, her virginity not being "consumed" by it. True to this understanding, our icon places the image of the Mother of God of the Sign in the bush in place of the fire.



Figure 10. Isaiah's Vision of the Lord. Detail from R2012.81

### Top Right Corner: Isaiah's Vision of the Lord, and His Call

*... I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above ... I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips ... yet my eyes have seen the King the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember which he had taken with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth with it. "See", he said, "now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed ..."<sup>21</sup>*

Unlike Catholicism, according to whose doctrine of the Immaculate Conception the Mother of God was conceived without original sin, Orthodoxy (as expressed by Sergei Bulgakov in his book "The Burning Bush"<sup>22</sup>) holds that she, being human, also bore the stain of original sin, but remained perpetually pure because she dwelt all her life in the intimate presence of God: first in the innocence of childhood, then during her sojourn in the Temple where she is said to have communed with angels, then during the period of her pregnancy, when she was in essence a tabernacle in which God dwelt, and finally in the presence of her divine son. Thus Mary was rendered pure by the fire of God's presence, just as Isaiah was cleansed by the touch of fire of God on his lips (Figure 10).

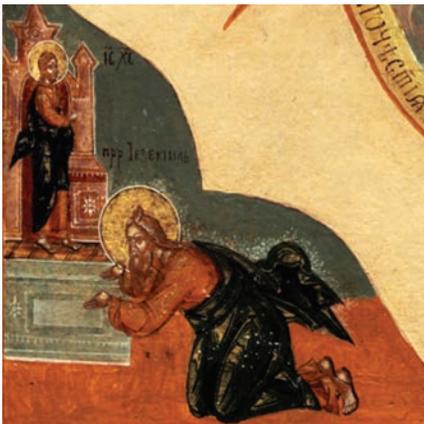


Figure 11. Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel. Detail from R2012.81

### Bottom Left Corner: The Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel

The consensus of writers seems to be that this image (Figure 11) represents the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the closed temple gate:

*He [i.e., God] brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary facing east; but it was closed. He said to me 'This gate is to remain closed' it is not to be opened for anyone to enter by it; since the Lord, the God of Israel has entered by it, it shall remain closed.<sup>23</sup>*

20 Exodus, chapter 3, verse 6.

21 Isaiah, chapter 5, verses 1-7.

22 S. N. Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, T. A. Smith, trans., (2009) William B. Eerdmans Publishing.

23 Ezekiel, chapter 44, verses 1-3.

This becomes clearer and follows logically from Ezekiel's Vision of the glory of God filling the temple, which precedes it:

*Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. ... And I fell on my face. As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the LORD filled the temple ... I heard one speaking to me out of the temple, and he said to me, "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel forever."<sup>24</sup>*

This can be seen as another prefiguration of the perpetual virginity of Mary, with the glory of God filling the temple corresponding to Jesus' taking flesh in Mary's body, her womb becoming as it were a tabernacle, the glory of God filling it, sanctifying it, and keeping it inviolate forever.



Figure 12. Jacob's Dream. Detail from R2012.81

### **Bottom Right Corner: Jacob's Dream**

The final image in the icon's bottom right-hand corner (Figure 12) concerns the dream of the patriarch Jacob, Abraham's grandson, from chapter 28 of the book of Genesis:

*When [Jacob] came upon a certain shrine, as the sun had already set, he stopped there for the night. ... Then he had a dream: a stairway [or ladder] rested on the ground, with its top reaching to the heavens; and God's messengers were going up and down on it. And there was the LORD standing beside him and saying: "I, the LORD, am the God of your forefather Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants. These shall be as plentiful as the dust of the earth, and through them you shall spread out east and west, north and south. In you and your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing. Know that I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I have done what I promised you." When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he exclaimed, "Truly, the LORD is in this spot, although I did not know it!" In solemn wonder he cried out: "How awesome is this shrine! This is nothing else but an abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven!"<sup>25</sup>*

Here again, the early church fathers interpreted this as a prefiguration of the role of the Mother of God in the economy of salvation, with the Theotokos, because of her unique position as the Mother of God, serving as the bridge, or ladder by which Jesus descended to the earth, and by which people are able to ascend to heaven. It is also why she is shown holding a ladder in the central portion of the icon.

<sup>24</sup> Ezekiel, chapter 43, verses 1-9.

<sup>25</sup> Genesis, chapter 28, verses 11-17.

## Protection From Fire

As we noted at the beginning, one of the primary reasons for the popular devotion to this icon stems not so much from the theology it expounds as from the belief that it is a kind of talisman against fire. This idea derives from an old folk tale:

*In ancient Russia, most houses were made of wood, and fire was an ever-present danger. One day a raging fire broke out and was consuming several buildings. An old woman was seen by someone, standing in front of her home, holding up a copy of the Unburnt Bush icon before the flames. The next morning all the houses around it were found to have been completely destroyed, but hers was completely untouched. This led to the superstitious belief that the icon was capable of preventing or extinguishing fires, a belief that became widespread throughout Russia.*

## Summing It Up: A Personal Interpretation of the Icon

It is interesting to note that the usual translation of the Russian title of the icon (Неопалимая Купина) as “burning bush” is not quite accurate. The word “Неопалима” can be translated as “intact” [Неопалимая would be the feminine form, since Купина is a feminine noun], so the emphasis is not so much on the idea that the burning bush is somehow miraculously protected from the destructive effects of the flame, as that God uses the bush as a vehicle through which to reveal himself. (It can also be translated as “unburnt”, since it is derived from the verb опалить, “to singe”).<sup>26</sup> In the same way, the Mother of God is seen in both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions as having given birth to Jesus without loss of her virginity, a belief proclaimed by the three stars that appear on the shoulders and forehead of the mantle of the Theotokos in icons, and in the chant of the church during the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, as well as during morning (“Matins”) and evening (“Compline”) services:

*It is entirely meet to bless thee, O Theotokos,  
Ever blessed, and spotless, and the Mother of our God,  
More honorable than the cherubim,  
And infinitely more glorious than the seraphim.  
We exalt thee who didst bear without corruption God the Word,  
Thee verily the Mother of God.<sup>27</sup>*

The Orthodox Church’s understanding of the unburnt bush as a symbol and foreshadowing of the virginity of the Mother of God shows even more clearly in the following kontakion hymn:

*You showed Moses, O Christ God,  
An image of your most pure Mother  
In the bush that burned yet was not consumed,  
For she herself was not consumed,  
When she received in her womb the fire of divinity!  
She remained incorrupt after her pure childbearing!  
By her prayers, O greatly merciful One,  
Deliver us from the flame of passions,  
And preserve your people from all harm!<sup>28</sup>*

At the same time, one can also see how the prayer’s last two lines might erroneously be related to the idea of protection from physical fire.

Finally, it is instructive to look at the “geography” of the icon. The entire icon can be seen as a reflection on the God’s revelation of himself to humanity, with each of its component images illustrating a manifestation of the presence of God throughout salvation history. At the same time, there is also a sense of motion, beginning from the

26 I am indebted to Professor Raoul Smith, Museum of Russian Icons, for pointing this out.

27 Theotokion Hymn (Axion estin) to the Mother of God, from the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. To hear the chant, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GSe1r6nfCc>.

28 Kontakion (tone 4), Feast of the Icon of the Mother of God “the Unburnt Bush” (September 4)

corners, where God reveals himself to Old Testament patriarchs, and moving steadily toward convergence at its center, where God finally reveals himself most directly and intimately in the person of Jesus, his only-begotten Son, the icon echoing the initial verses of the Letter to the Hebrews:

*In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets. In these last days, he spoke through us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe, who is the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being, and who sustains all things by his mighty word. When he had accomplished purification from sins, she took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.<sup>29</sup>*

Indeed, it is this very convergence that relates its various components to one another and gives the icon its fundamental unity.

This ultimate revelation of God through his redemptive self-emptying<sup>30</sup> is, in the Christian narrative, only possible through the Incarnation, which itself depended on the willingness of the Mother of God to allow herself to become a channel for God to pour himself into the world, and which provides the rationale for her presence at the very center of the heavenly sphere. Viewed from this perspective, therefore, the structure of the icon of the Mother of God Unburnt Bush can be seen as a reflection on the geography of salvation.

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29 Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 1, verses 1-4.

30 Letter to the Philippians, chapter 2, verses 6-8: “[Jesus} though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

~ ~ ~

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