

## CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

### 7.1 Summary of the Discussion

Identification of these issues which are of specific importance towards understanding biblical interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church, determined the main goal of the preceding chapter of this study.

We purposefully aimed at keeping the emphasis on the history of biblical interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church and on Orthodox biblical hermeneutics - Russian biblical scholarship was regarded from a neutral point of view. Outlining the historical character and accompanying crucial factors on the process of the study of biblical interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church, was the issue of importance. The biblical interpretation in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church as implemented during the Kiev period (x-xiii cc.) up to the Synodal period (1721-1917), has been the object of this survey which furthermore concentrated on the Orthodox biblical hermeneutics within the same period. Thus, both the historical perspective of the biblical interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church and the hermeneutical perspective, which specifically serves as understanding of biblical interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church, formed the centre of our focus. A summarized account of our discussions precedes the results of this study.

Chapter 2 addressed the methodological issues. We emphasized the fact that it is not at all possible to live and understand the “present” in isolation from the context of “history” which enfolds a broader space of time. The current circumstances in the Russian Orthodox Church and the international and interconfessional relationships within the Christendom formed the motivation to undertake the study of the history of Bible interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church in order to give greater meaning to the interaction with the Russian Orthodox Christianity (at least on regarding study of the Bible). Rösen underlines this idea by stating, “Experiencing the antiquity of the past open up the future potential of the present.”<sup>1</sup>

In chapter 3 we mainly focused on characteristics and factors that played the main role in determining the inquiry of bible interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church

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<sup>1</sup> Jörn Rösen, *Studies in Metahistory* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1993), 89.

during the Kiev period (x-xiii cc.) up to the Synodal period (1721-1917). In the course of our study, it was established that although the Holy Scripture formed the basis of the Russian Christianity and the Bible translations were widely circulated in the nation, the reading of the Bible (i. e. in the early period of the Russian Orthodox Church) was definitely not approached with theoretical knowledge in mind and thus did not motivate nor lead to creative activity in the theological sphere. During this period Russian found it easier to “express their thoughts and feelings through music, colour and design than through books and learned discourses.”<sup>2</sup> Although the Russian Orthodox Church’s organic development was threatened by disruption in the period that followed (i. e. the period of the Mongol invasion, 1280-1480), our study revealed a preoccupation with the translations and corrections of the multiplicity of the religious text circulating in Russia at that time. The Bible was not yet considered a highly valuable object of study. Furthermore our study established that from the early centuries of the Russian Christianity the Biblical text itself had been regarded as of less importance than the biblical texts (accepted in the Church).

The exemplified exegesis of the Church Fathers was of prime significance as source of learning during the following centuries of the Church’s history (xv-xviii cc). The importance of Russian heretical movements stimulated a new Slavonic translation of the Bible. The Church’s clergymen attributed the heresies and doubts to the reading and misinterpretation of biblical texts. At this point a proper understanding of the biblical literature gained its first significance (ideologically spoken). In the attempt to discover such understanding, the Church has traditionally followed the Patristics as a dogmatic-doctrinal guide.

The Russian Orthodox exegetes’ concentration on the works of ancient Church interpreters laid a huge constraint on them, albeit voluntarily. From about 1820, a new spirit of inquiry is clearly discernable in Russia. The advance made in theological education lead the Orthodox exegetes to an awareness of the critical methods in historical and literary scholarship which had developed in the West at that time. They furthermore witnessed the religious philosophical awakening in Russia. The line of intellectual thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century provided the Orthodox biblical interpretation with the following aspects: (1) a basis for theorizing, (2) the prospect of interdisciplinary studies, and (3) an openness for the new solutions. All this brought about an era of practical enthusiasm in the field of bible interpretation.

Chapter 4 examined *selected* anthropological aspects relevant to the Russian Orthodox Church that exercised both a direct and indirect impact upon the Orthodox

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<sup>2</sup> Zernov, 5.



biblical hermeneutics. This chapter presented a general overview of some key Orthodox anthropological beliefs, followed by an account of several specific features of Orthodox anthropology as examined, such as: (1) the nature of Russian man, (2) the wholeness of man; and (3) the concept of *theurgy*; which proved to be particularly helpful in understanding of how the Church's anthropological ideas are not only linked with Orthodox hermeneutics, but actually determine it.

Conclusively chapter 4 stated that the existential difference between *man prior to faith* and *man under faith* (established in the religious categories of the Orthodox anthropology), is the hermeneutical key for understanding God's divine truth of the Bible. The Orthodox anthropology, based on mystical experience, presupposes a fairly free rein on the cognitive search for truth, even entailing that which lies beyond the material world as perceived by the senses. The principle of Orthodox hermeneutical theory, however, implies a complex dimension that involves the historical relationship between Church tradition and individual mystical experience. Evidence to this fact becomes more prominent in the assessment of the anthropological concept of *wholeness of man* as the existential hermeneutical principle. In the Russian Orthodox hermeneutics this excludes any individual interpretation of the Scripture, for the interpretation is only acceptable in an interrelating context of the Orthodox community, correlating with that which already exists within this *whole*. Mystical realism and the ecclesiastical consciousness (e.g. the truth belongs to the Russian Church) accentuate the *religio-metaphysical* superiority of the Russian Orthodox interpreters in perceiving divine truths of the Bible (e.g. through the teachings of the Orthodox Church). The Orthodox anthropology links the Spirit's creative energies within the individual with human creative efforts. The Orthodox exegesis can be indicated as a divine-human initiative based on collaboration between the divine Spirit and the human interpreter.

Chapter 5 gives an account of Bogdashevskii's life and scholarship, emphasizing his hermeneutics. A performed case study which focused on the analysis of the Russian Orthodox hermeneutics according to the work of one particular scholar, is reflected in this chapter and it served as an example of the hermeneutical trends as observed in the Russian Orthodox Church. It has been concluded that Bogdashevskii's philosophical perspective (especially in his view about science and philosophy) reveals the important Orthodox feature, namely to accept religious (or ecclesiastic) faith as frame of reference for any scientific investigation which is related to Christian faith. Thus, Bogdashevskii leaves no room for critical historical inquiry without reference to the Church and Tradition as of prime importance for his understanding in his field of study. There is a clear relation between Bogdashevskii's exegesis and hermeneutics and the general tendency in the

hermeneutics of the Russian Orthodox Church to support, secure and clarify the accepted understanding of the Church. In Bogdashevskii's hermeneutics the accent moves from the present to the past, from the modern exegetical method to that of the Church Fathers. His hermeneutics does not reflect a personal-individual point of view, but rather incorporates a language that represents the meaning "for the Church". In Bogdashevskii, reasoning and searching for this meaning shows the ecclesiastic mind to be epistemologically superior to the individual human. In this respect, Bogdashevskii's work well serves as an example of the Orthodox exegetical tendencies that prevailed in the investigation into the historical realities of the Bible as seen from the perspective of the ecclesiastic point of view. The ecclesiastic approach bears hermeneutical significance as far as the conflict between the Church's historical exposition of the New Testament and the findings of the modern historical inquiry is concerned. On the whole, Bogdashevskii's hermeneutics attributes to a many-faceted *rule of trust* in the mind of the Church. His maxim, - believe as the Church prescribes, live as the Church commends<sup>3</sup>- follows the main lines of the Russian Orthodox hermeneutics.

Chapter 6 summarized and interpreted the fundamental principles and main features peculiar to Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation, using the attestation to these principles in the foregoing study as a basis. The chapter demonstrated that the main hermeneutical features of the Russian Orthodox Church: (1) are deeply influenced by patristic exegesis; (2) show that the Orthodox Church is *a priori* in reading the Bible; (3) place an entire dogmatic premise as a quintessential criterion for the Bible interpretation; (4) exalt the Church tradition as the indispensable guide to the understanding of Scripture; (5) consider Christ as the *beginning-centre-* and *end* of biblical interpretation (Christ is *the* hermeneutical key to Scripture); (6) base Orthodox exegesis upon cooperation between the Holy Spirit and the human interpreter; (7) demands a critical reading of the Scriptures guided by the Church dogmatics, and a multidisciplineed approach to the text which includes proper attention to questions of grammar, logic, history of the text, translations, criticism of editions, and exegesis proper.

Having summarized our discussion and conclusions, our conclusive findings on the question of the hermeneutics in the Russian Orthodox Church now follow.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. I. Bogdashevskii, "Lecture. On the Significance of the Church," *TKDA* 3 (1913): 457 [my italics].



## 7.2 The Conclusions on the Orthodox Hermeneutics

The hermeneutical issues relevant to the Russian Orthodox Church are firmly rooted in a set of theological and ecclesiastic convictions. A particular point of view is consequently maintained, namely that the processes of Bible interpretation must be governed by three indicative factors, which are: (1) the Bible itself as a self-interpreting device; (2) the Church; (3) tradition of the Fathers of the Church.<sup>4</sup>

Our study pointed out that at the very dawn of the Russian Orthodox Church's life, both Scripture and Tradition were both regarded as the instructive agents for all the activity of the Orthodox Christians. The Orthodox hermeneutics regards the view that the content of the Bible can be clearly perceived by self-interpretation favourable, yet it disagrees to the Bible as the only foundation of the Christian faith. The Orthodox Church has never allocated for Scripture (*alone*) a role of exceptional importance. The Church has always maintained fundamental significance of biblical writings alongside the tradition of the Church in defining and preserving the Orthodox faith. The "orthodox" conditions which are laid down for biblical interpretation confirm the two-source theory that both the Bible and the Christian Orthodox tradition represent the sources for authentic Orthodox Christian faith and theology. This forms a sharp difference to the Protestant theory that the Bible alone is a sufficient source.

Moreover, a style of reading and interpretation of the Bible, which resulted in the acceptance of certain doctrines and the condemnation of others, was determined by tradition. Thus, the Orthodox biblical hermeneutics suggests that the biblical scholars take as starting point Scripture and tradition in a total reflection of faith (i.e. as it officially interpreted by the Church). Hence, there is no room for doubt left for the scholars about the reliability of the way of transmission of the Bible, nor can they consider portions of the Bible as contradictory to the factual historical events. Where the biblical accounts on a particular event vary in detail (especially in the Gospels) the scholars are obliged to seek correspondence of the texts and affirm their authenticity. (Bogdashevskii's exegesis exemplified this practice very well.) The Orthodox biblical hermeneutics intends to put the Bible into the exclusive realm of ecclesiastical interpretation. The specific way, in which the Bible functions in the Orthodox experience, rests upon the fact of ecclesiastic prescription. Regarding this observation, it can be said that the approach of Orthodox biblical hermeneutics is *not* open-ended and searching. The weakness of the attempts to interpret

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ignatii (Semenov), *Primechaniia k chteniiu i tolkovaniiu Sviashchennogo Pisaniia po ukazaniiu samogo Pisaniia v tolkovanii sviatootecheskikh* [*The Remarks for Reading and Interpretation of Holy Scripture according to itself and Patristic interpretations*] (SPb.: 1848), 2.



Scripture in a confessional setting, can be observed in the following: (1) answers are sometime offered before questions are asked; (2) creativity can be threatened; and (3) challenges are met with anti-intellectual or separatist responses.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally the Russian Orthodox exegetes give significant attention to the works of the Church Fathers, who lived so close to the apostolic times that it leaves no doubt that they represent the doctrine as they received it from the Apostles to the Orthodox Church. The Apostles received the doctrine from Christ and the Holy Spirit who both directed them the Apostles in what they taught, wrote and ordained.

The Russian Orthodox biblical hermeneutics does argue for the Orthodox theological hegemony, i.e. hegemony of Orthodox ways of reading the Bible. It does not encourage the people to read the Bible self-consciously and self-critically within their own context. In this regard, the Orthodox biblical hermeneutics leaved no possibility of a fresh approach towards reading biblical texts. In the Russian Orthodoxy, there is definite way of reading and that is the reading of the Church which excludes various contextual readings of the Bible.

Our study has shown that the biblical interpretation as practiced by the Russian Orthodox Church is best understood within a historical-dogmatic tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church and the history of the Russian nation. There has always been a correlation between the interpretation of the contemporary situation in the Church and nation on the one hand and interpretation of the scriptural texts on the other hand. For example, all the attempts to alter Slavic biblical and liturgical texts by using Greek or Hebrew as standards were met with resistance, rejection and repression.<sup>6</sup>

This study demonstrated that the Russian Orthodox Church firmly maintains the Scriptural roots and dimensions of every theological discipline: dogma, ecclesiology and moral theology. The Russian Orthodox interpreters of the Bible, however, were restricted

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 176. "Before the Russian Revolution, free discussion of the problem arising from a critical and historical approach to the Bible was heavily censored if not completely forbidden, in official academic theology." Alexander Schmemmann, "Russian Theology: An Introductory Survey," *SVTQ* 16 (1972): 176.

<sup>6</sup> *The Modern Encyclopedia of Religion in Russia and Soviet Union*, vol. 4 (Gulf Breeze, FL.: Academic International Press, 1991), s. v. "Bible, Church Slavonic," by Henry R. Cooper Jr. Copper is also right that such attempts were made by Metropolitan Alexis in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Maxim the Greek in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Patriarch Nikon in the 17<sup>th</sup>, Peter the Great in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the Russian Bible society in the 19<sup>th</sup>. For a specific example, Ignatii has clearly indicated that his book on the rules of Bible interpretation have been stimulated by the Church historical circumstances. See Ignatii (Semenov), *Primechaniia k chteniiu i tolkovaniiu Sviashchennogo Pisaniia po ukazaniiu samogo Pisaniia v tolkovanii sviatootecheskikh* [*The Remarks for Reading and Interpretation of Holy Scripture according to itself and Patristic interpretations*] (SPb.: 1848), 1-4.

from theologising and theorising merely with a pure scholarly approach. The Orthodox Church “implicitly rather than explicitly rejects the isolation of Scripture in a closed and self-sufficient field of study.”<sup>7</sup> The slow advance in the process of the Orthodox Bible interpretation is associated with the fact that often the Russian Orthodox scholars have not been paying proper attention to the previous works and systems of their own predecessors. Subsequently the Orthodox biblical scholarship seems to be lacking a gradual development in its own legacy. On the contrary, the larger context of the Orthodox Bible interpretation strongly reflects a reactive and apologetic character (fixed on the “external” developments: such as heresies, novelties, etc.).

Orthodox hermeneutics demands the effectiveness of biblical literary exegesis not to be overestimated. Exegesis does not implicitly search for the writer's meaning which is a matter which is settled by the Church's canons; it does not question what is true or false, but only communicates what the writer intended to say. Hence an exegetical truth may be an objective falsehood, unless the work subjected to the application of hermeneutic principles endowed with the quality of inerrancy (which is not the case in Orthodoxy). Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox exegesis does not investigate the authenticity of a work, or the integrity of its text. Orthodox biblical hermeneutics requires that the exegete to be equipped with an applicable knowledge of the history of the canon of both the Old and New Testaments, be acquainted to the results of lower or textual criticism, and to have a thorough knowledge of the Church's teaching.

### **7.3 The Contribution of this study**

This study has shown that the interpretation of the Bible in the Orthodox Church has been undertaken for many years. These results must be studied. A modern historiography of biblical interpretation should not stay restricted by confessional or national boundaries and should not ignore the Bible interpretation and biblical hermeneutics within the Russian Orthodox tradition.

This study also points out the fact that once established, biblical studies in the Russian Orthodoxy formed its personal fundamental principles for interpretation. Many of these principles correlate and correspond closely with common principles of biblical interpretation attested in the other Christian traditions. Yet, basically, they form “Russian

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, “Russian Theology: An Introductory Survey,” *SVTQ* 16 (1972): 177.



Orthodox Hermeneutics.” The main purpose of this study was more than formulating the hermeneutical question as reflected in the works of Orthodox biblical scholars, it also intended to give those both in the East and in the West who are outside the Russian Orthodox confessional borders a comprehensive introduction to the historical and hermeneutical perspective of the biblical interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church. The prevailing circumstances accentuate its importance: (1) a general ignorance of the Russian Orthodox Church; (2) ignorance of the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church influences the mentality and self- understanding of the Russian people.<sup>8</sup> Our study should be of assistance to those who want to teach the Bible in the Russian context and who are not well familiar with the history and hermeneutics of biblical research in the Russian Orthodox Church. In addition, in our opinion, all the attempts of developing the contextual theology among the Russian Christians due regard should be paid to the heritage of the Orthodox Church.

The relation between the Orthodox Christianity and the Bible should be clarified in order to establish a deeper comprehension of God’s revelation and the understanding of a development of the Christianity in Russia. Those outside the Russian Orthodox confession (in the East and in the West) will gain better understanding of the Eastern Church through the knowledge of theological and historical resources as provided through this study. Our analysis provides a basis for comparison between the Russian Orthodox approach to the Bible and other praxis and theories of Bible interpretation.

Our study showed that the Russian Orthodox Church has the privilege of benefit from many centuries of church history during which the Orthodox Christians made a contribution through their reading and reflection on many various passages of the Bible. This is in a strong hermeneutical link between the Russian Orthodox Church and Christianity of the early centuries. Our study observed that the Orthodox Church is trusty to many earlier theologians of the Church. The intellectual heritage of the Fathers and close relationship to the hermeneutical praxis of the Patristics should be respected. The Orthodox Church maintains the special theological authority of the Fathers of the Church (as a group the Fathers of the Church were presumably connection with the apostles or at least with early Christian antiquity).

The Russian Orthodox Church maintained an example of reverence and trust as far as non-canonical writings of the early church are concerned. In this regard, the Bible

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<sup>8</sup> Russian self- understanding is faithfully linked to the history of Russian Church, monasticism, Russian sanctity. This is one of the major thesis in a historiography of the Russian culture. Cf. M. O. Koyalovich, *Istoriia russkogo samopoznaniia po istoricheskim pamiatnikam i nauchnym sochineniiam* [*History of the Russian Self-Awareness According to Historical Monuments and Scientific Works*] (SPb.: 1884).



interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church stands in contrast to the other parts of the Christianity that failed to respect and learn from the Fathers.<sup>9</sup>

#### 7.4 The Prospects for Further Studies

I trust that my attempt to address the historical and hermeneutical issues that are relevant to the Bible interpretation within the Russian Orthodox Church will stimulate the appearance of new works in the field under review and will help researchers at the start of their careers.

The history of bible interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church might be investigated further with the detailed developments within a particular period in the Church History (19<sup>th</sup> century, for example) in mind or with special reference to a select individual (for example, Feofan Propokovich (1681-1736)<sup>10</sup>, Aleksandr P. Lopukhin (1852-1904), or Sergius Bulgakov (1871- 1944)<sup>11</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> Erickson, among the others, self-critically argues that in general the conservative or evangelical segment of Christianity is guilty of being critical of earlier theologians. Cf. M. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Feofan Propokovich (1681-1736) - politician, Church leader and theologian was one of the chief supporters of Peter's reforms. Some called him "the Deputy of Petrine Reforms." Florovsky, *Puti*, 90. In his writings, Propokovich: (1) insists in biblical foundation for preaching; (2) stresses the importance of careful biblical exegesis in making any doctrinal conclusion; (3) defends "the wholeness and self-sufficiency of Scripture"; and (4) confesses that the Bible, as the Word of God, is the full and sufficient guide in all matters of faith and practice. The Bible, for him, is *principium cognoscendi* for all theological and practical questions [cf. Florovsky, *Puti*, 92-93]. He calls to interpret the Bible through the glance of itself. "The *consensus patrum*, for Feofan, is only the *humanum testimonium*." Ibid., 93. In his theological views Feofan was very close to the protestant positions (esp. to Luther's teaching on *sola fidei*). Some even claim that Feofan actually was a Protestant. Cf. Ibid., 94.

<sup>11</sup> The Russian Orthodox theologian Sergius Bulgakov mainly is known for his work on such issues as: (1) a Christian social system, i.e., the Orthodox view on the alleviating adverse social and economic conditions in Russia politics and socialism; (2) religion and culture; (3) the essence and development of the Russian intelligentsia, i.e., the class of intellectuals regarded as possessing culture and political initiative; (4) the problem of the church's life; (5) the problem of art, especially when viewed as an activity which includes a distinctive way of looking at the world; (6) the response to historicism, that is, the recognition that the past is radically different from the present and can be grasped only in terms of its own context, and the tendency to regard all knowledge and all experience as subject to historical change, etc. Bulgakov's contribution to hermeneutical theory is not well recognized in theological literature. For example, a well-known Orthodox writer remarks briefly about Bulgakov's hermeneutical theory and he fallaciously condenses it to mere biblical symbolism. In this study we have paid attention only to his concept of *theurgy* Alexander Men', "Toward the History of Russian Orthodox Biblical Studies," *BT* 28 (1987): 281.

The entire study can and should be done to evaluate a theological system of Socio-Critical and Socio-Pragmatic strands of the Russian Orthodox bible interpretation in the beginning of the twentieth century. The preliminary observation of the development of these strands among the Orthodox-religious socialists allows us to conclude that, in a limited sense, it is an earlier version of so-called Liberation Theology, which employs not only pure doctrinal views, but also social, political, and economic theories (we briefly discussed the issue in Chapter 5).

It is also possible to approach the history of the Russian Orthodox biblical interpretation (and hermeneutics) in *comparison* with the developments attested in the Roman Catholic and Protestant confessions. In our judgement, however, the bible interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church *should not be measured in comparison* with the Western biblical scholarship, but assessed in the context of its own situation - within the historical frame of the Church.<sup>12</sup>

Our study of the Orthodox hermeneutics was primarily focused on the use of critical tools in private reading of the New Testament. It is not to say that biblical understanding in the Orthodox Church occurs mainly in private reading and investigation of the Bible. On the contrary, in the Russian Orthodox Church the biblical interpretation is grounded in the church's exposition, not in the theoretical analysis of the academy. The exposition of the Word of God is of utmost importance in the Church's worship. Yet, as we noticed in case of Bogdashevskii (Chapter 5), the Russian Orthodox exegetes do not develop the conception that exposition of the Word is the centre of Orthodox liturgy. We recognize, however, that the Russian Orthodox Christians (for the most part) experience Scripture more in a liturgical celebration, than in their private reading and study. Therefore, further study of the hermeneutics in the Russian Orthodox Church should pay closer attention to the liturgical use of the Word of God.

On the whole, the final word on the history of biblical interpretation in Russian Orthodox Church is a perplexing task, because "for a simply curious mind and all the more for the mind longing for a serious study of the development of Biblical studies in Russia, its observation presents many things that make one think, rejoice and sorrow, meditate and search."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I agree with Zernov's claim, - "The secret of Russian culture is that it is both Christian and non Western. Russians follow the Byzantine version of Eastern Orthodoxy, which is neither Roman nor Reformed." *Zernov*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> "Для мысли и просто любознательной, а тем более желающей серьезно изучать эту область, обозрение ее представляет много такого, что заставляет задуматься, порадоваться и поскорбеть, помыслить и размыслить." *Mikhail (Luzin)*, 115.