

Negrov, Alexander I. *Biblical interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church: A historical and hermeneutical perspective*. Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 130. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008. Pp. xv + 348. Cloth. €89.00. ISBN 3161483715.

Alexander Negrov, in his book, *Biblical Interpretation in the Russian Orthodox Church*, demonstrates the ecclesiological and anthropological basis of the biblical hermeneutic in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). He describes the context of biblical interpretation in Russian history, from the late 10th to early 20th centuries, and analyzes the New Testament exegetical assumptions of the pre-revolutionary Russian scholar, Dimitri (Archbishop VASILII) Bogdashevskii (1861-1933). By combining historical trends of exegesis with the work of a specific scholar in his analysis, Negrov lays out the presuppositions and unique intellectual trajectory of exegesis in the ROC. This study contributes to the field of history of biblical interpretation because he has brought into the discussion a large amount of pre-revolutionary, Russian language literature, which, because of a shortage of extant copies and English-language translations, lies beyond the reach of many Western biblical scholars.

Chapter 2, “The Theory and Practice of History: Methodological Strategy,” demonstrates how Negrov approaches the material as a historian. He combines a broad approach with one based on a particular individual. On the one hand, he looks at the general trends of interpretation of the Bible through the major periods of Russian history (chapter 2). Similarly, he examines the general presuppositions of Russian hermeneutics (chapter 3). On the other hand, he chose a “great thinker method,” by which he looks at the manifestation of historical trends in a single individual (18). While he mentions the work and ideas of various exegetes of the ROC, he focuses on a single author. He thus combines diachronic and synchronic analyses, which strengthens the credibility of his conclusions.

After laying down his historical theoretical framework in chapter 2, Negrov begins his diachronic study with chapter 3. He demonstrates how historical forces led to an insistence on traditional, patristic exegesis of the Bible, once Russia came into more regular contact with western ideas in the 19th century. During the Kievan period (10th-13th c.), the newly converted nation received the Bible in the midst of other Church writings, including writings of the Church Fathers, alongside liturgical books and non-canonical texts (27-33). Negrov notes that “the Orthodox Church in Russia received the Bible and Tradition as coequal” (33), which resulted in a less distinct limit between the Bible and other sacred literature. The phase of the Tatar invasion (1280-1480) saw limited contact between Russia and their Byzantine coreligionists, isolating the development of Russian Christian thought. The invaders nonetheless allowed Christian education. The Bible, in the context of patristic interpretation, lay at the basis of this education (38). In the third phase (15th-18th c.), Russia became increasingly independent from the Byzantines, as Constantinople fell in 1453. Furthermore, in the growing theological academies, Russian, not Greek, was selected for academic study (46). The 19th century, the fourth phase, saw new internal philosophical and social movements. These new ideas sparked debates within the ROC regarding the suitability of engagement with western hermeneutics, especially historical critical methods insofar as these methods conflicted with traditional exegesis (117-128). This final period saw decreasing isolation, and hence a new need for the ROC to defend their particular traditional approach to exegesis.

Negrov begins his synchronic analysis in chapter 4, where he describes how the hermeneutic of the ROC in the 19th and early 20th centuries depends on its anthropology (135). Negrov did not explain whether the influence of anthropology on hermeneutics was unique to the ROC, or whether, perhaps, all biblical hermeneutical systems depended on anthropology. In this system, humans are essentially body and soul, both of which are corrupted, and, hence, separated from God, because of sin. The believer, however, is able to participate in the body of Christ, that is, the ROC. Moreover, the Church is the locus of the Holy Spirit, whose function is to sanctify and deify the believer continuously, freeing him or her from the passions. The fruit of this process is the ability to gain mystical knowledge from God (140). The human being is thus perfected by God within the ROC, linking the anthropology and ecclesiology of the ROC. Since biblical interpretation reveals knowledge through the Holy Spirit, the Bible may only be understood properly in the locus of the Holy Spirit, the ROC. An individual thus cannot interpret the Bible outside these ecclesial boundaries. At the same time, scientific study of the Bible is allowed if these boundaries are understood.

The work of Dimitrii (Archbishop VASILII) Bogdashevskii, an example of this hermeneutical-anthropological link in the ROC (155), is surveyed and analyzed in chapter 5. While Bogdashevskii began as a philosopher focused on Plato, he later turned to NT exegesis. The NT represented for him the perfect philosophy and source of wisdom (184), but which requires “a connection with a divine agent of the highest religious reality” to be understood properly (171). This “divine agent” is the Holy Spirit in the ROC. Moreover, the Bible is interpreted in the ROC according to patristic tradition and is perfected in ethical purification in “Christian living” (227) and deification by the Holy Spirit (257).

In this way, Negrov demonstrates the consistent links of ecclesiology and anthropology with biblical interpretation in the ROC. On the one hand, Negrov sees how the hermeneutics of the ROC depends on ecclesiology. Furthermore, he claims that this dependency limits productive exegesis, as it has produced a tendency towards reactive, apologetic interpretation and a lack of originality (302). It would have helped to have more examples of this dependency and limitation at this point. On the other hand, the close adherence of the ROC to its patristic intellectual inheritance in the modern context makes this hermeneutic an important field of study.

A substantive issue arises regarding Negrov’s general reference to “patristic exegesis.” While Negrov asserts that patristic writings form the foundation of Russian Orthodox interpretation, we do not see explicit interactions between Russian Orthodox exegetes and particular patristic sources, not even through examples regarding Bogdashevskii. It is not clear if this resulted from the limitations of Negrov’s book or from the lack of citations in the original sources. In either case, further research into this area would be helpful. Moreover, seeing how interpretation in the ROC depends on patristic exegesis would help in the area of comparative interpretation between ROC and Western—especially Protestant—exegesis. Along similar lines, it would be helpful to see how exegesis varies within the ROC, as well as among the various branches of the Orthodox communion.¹ Such studies would help nuance Negrov’s discoveries and conclusions.

1 For example, see the sketch of Orthodox exegesis in North America by Timothy Clark, “Recent Eastern Orthodox interpretation of the New Testament.” *Currents in Biblical Research* 5 (2007): 322-340.

Another question this book raises is how representative Bogdashevskii was for his time. Negrov explains that he chose Bogdashevskii for his case study because 1) he was representative of more than a “tiny minority” in the ROC, 2) he stayed connected to Church life, and 3) earned a “high regard” among clergy and scholars of his time (155). Nevertheless, it would be interesting to hear from his contemporary critics, in order to see how his methodology compared with other major figures of his time. Negrov paints a general picture of the hermeneutics of the ROC in chapter 4, but does not look at any scholar in particular. Answering these questions would perhaps go beyond the constraints of this book, but contextualizing Bogdashevskii among other scholars would have contributed greatly.

For the field of the history of biblical interpretation, further study of the hermeneutic of the Russian Orthodox Church is essential, as Negrov rightly notes. While the sources are difficult to access, a proper history of biblical interpretation cannot exclude Russia which constitutes a large portion of Christendom with a 1000 year history. This book offers an important, in-depth treatment of an area of hermeneutics and history of biblical interpretation in an area often neglected by and inaccessible to Western biblical scholars.

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