A Reconsideration of Jan Hus in Light of the Prague Reform

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Introduction

From 1402-1415 Jan Hus served as the face of the Bohemian reform movement, a movement that began before his time and would continue after his death. The dozen years, from the time of his installation as rector of Bethlehem Chapel (Betlemská Kaple) until his death at Constance, may seem a short time for a career to have such a great impact; but many other factors also coincided with Hus’ ministry to make this a formative time in the history of the Czech nation and the church at large. While there are many directions that an exploration of Hus’ life and ministry could take, this paper will focus on the developments in liturgical practice that Hus effected through his ministry at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, and will emphasize that Hus was indeed a leader in the liturgical arm of the Prague reform.

Famous for his preaching, Hus preached over 3,000 sermons in the Czech language during his time at Bethlehem. His preaching attracted many hearers, and his resulting fame made him the popular face of the Czech reform movement. Despite this, Hus should not be seen merely as a preacher, but as a pastor with the cure of his people’s souls as his primary motivation. He did much to develop the liturgical practice at Bethlehem and to influence the future reform movement in liturgical directions. I will thus argue, in opposition to some scholars, that Hus was deeply concerned with liturgy and the sacraments

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1 The author would like to thank his wife, Rachel LeCroy, for her help in editing this paper.
2 A “reform movement” is here defined (by me) as a party, influenced by similar ideas and possessing like concerns, who intentionally advocate an agenda for the change of the status quo in areas related to their shared ideas and concerns. No statement of historical connection between these reforms and the Protestant Reformation is being asserted here, though that may be a worthy thesis to argue in another place.
5 Spinka, Biography, 51.
and that his preaching should be seen as a part, albeit a necessary one, of his overall priestly liturgical and sacramental ministry.6

This argument will be developed as follows: First, I will trace the history of the Prague reform movement and of Bethlehem Chapel prior to Hus, in order to situate him within a context of liturgical reform and pastoral renewal. Second, I will detail Hus’ changes and developments in the divine services at Bethlehem Chapel. Finally, I will explain how Hus’ preaching should be viewed within this broader liturgical context.

Betlemská Kaple and the Prague Reform

The reform movement in Prague predates Hus by three generations, originating in the time of Emperor Charles IV (1316-78), himself Czech, who renovated Prague, established Prague University, and selected Prague as his imperial seat.7 In the early 1360’s Charles invited the renowned German preacher Konrad Waldhauser (1326-69) to move from Vienna to Prague in order to help spiritually renovate the city that Charles was renovating physically.8 Preaching in German against moral laxity among the laity and the clergy, first at St. Gall and then at the Tyn Church, Waldhauser was very successful among the German-speaking population of Prague. Enemies opposed to his reformist preaching had him cited and sent to Rome in order to silence him, but he was acquitted of all charges. Even so, he was not able to continue his work in Prague, for he died soon after his return.

Although Waldhauser’s German language ministry was not able to reach most of the Czechs of the city, a Czech canon of St. Vitus Cathedral named Jan Milíč z Kroměříž9 (1325-74) understood German and thus was able to learn from Waldhauser.10 Moreover, it seems that Waldhauser’s preaching had a drastic effect upon Milíč, for in 1363 he resigned his lucrative post as canon to enter voluntary poverty and become a preacher.11 Milíč’s message was essentially the same as Waldhauser’s: the morals of the laity and the clergy needed to improve, and all clergy should renounce wealth.12 Milíč preached

6 Many regard Hus solely for his preaching at the neglect of his liturgical forms. Others argue directly that he was not as influential in the liturgical aspect of the Prague reform.
7 For more information on Charles IV see Bede Jarrett, The Emperor Charles IV (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1935).
9 The “z” in Milíč’s name means “from”, like the “da” in Leonardo da Vinci.
10 For more information on Milíč see Spinka, Biography, 12-16. Spinka, Concept of Church, 14-15.
11 The Gospel of Luke and the Revelation of St. John wrote, “Whoever of you renounces not all that he has, cannot be my disciple,” and, “Come out of her my people, and have no fellowship with her sins….” Ibid., 13.
daily in three languages (Czech, German, and Latin) in three different churches in Prague’s Old Town.¹³ Milič’s influence was great; for, according to Hus Scholar Matthew Spinka, “The crowds filled these churches to overflowing . . .”¹⁴

In the early 1370’s Milič had another life-changing experience. Through his ministry at St. Giles, which was in the “red light district” of Prague, he converted a prostitute. This evidently had a profound effect upon him, for he ultimately gave up preaching in the three churches in order to begin a ministry to prostitutes. With the help of financiers, he razed the famous brothel “Venice” to the ground, and had built in its place both a house for converted prostitutes (“Jerusalem”) and a church dedicated to Mary Magdalene. Jerusalem held enough room for the communal living of up to 200 converted prostitutes in Jerusalem; and Milič preached to them daily, counseled them, and heard their confessions.¹⁵

The most important liturgical development during this time was Milič’s advocacy for the frequent, even daily, reception of communion by the laity. He saw the Eucharist as socially transformative. For him, the spiritual nourishment of both individual and community that occurs through communing with the body and blood of Christ was indispensable. He attributed the success of his ministry at Jerusalem both to his preaching and to the frequent reception of communion by all.¹⁶ Henceforth reception of communion became a central tenet of the Prague reform, and it is essential for understanding the liturgical foundations of Hus.

Due to his radical methodology, Milič gained enemies among the conservatives in the city, whose feelings were further exacerbated due to his popularity and success.¹⁷ In order to silence Milič, they had him cited on two charges, one before Pope Urban V in Rome, and the other before Cardinal Grimoaldì in Avignon.¹⁸ This effort seems to have been an attempt to keep Milič away from Prague by enmeshing him in procedural bureaucracy; for although he was cleared of the charges in Rome and received with dignity and honor in Avignon, he died before his return. His opponents had the Jerusalem community abolished, and the buildings were given to the Cistercians as their student hostel. However, the reform movement would live on through a young student from Janov named Matěj, who lived and worked with Milič in the

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¹⁴ Spinka, Biography, 13.
¹⁵ Spinka, Biography, 14. Fudge, Magnificent Ride, 50.
¹⁶ Fudge, Magnificent Ride, 50.
¹⁷ These enemies included parish priests, who were worried about losses from their own congregation due to the popularity of the ministry, many among the Dominicans and Franciscans, as well as various others who were anti-reform. Fudge, Magnificent Ride, 50.
¹⁸ Both charges were charges of Heresy. Specifically his opponents accused him of building a church where a brothel had once stood, dressing his reformed prostitutes in clothing resembling the habit of a nun, of acting as their “Superior”, and of imposing penalties for misconduct. All of these were true, but not heretical. Thus he was cleared by Urban V in Rome, but died before he could gain a verdict in Avignon. Spinka, Biography, 14.
Jerusalem community before the former’s departure for studies at the Sorbonne in 1373. The Parisian Master, as Janov was known, would return eight years later to head the continuing efforts for reform in the city of Prague.

Matěj z Janov (1355-1393) took up a life of apostolic poverty and dedicated himself to the reform movement shortly after his return from Paris. He served at St. Nicholas, where he emphasized the tenets of his predecessors, Milíč and Waldhauser. In addition to preaching against immorality and stressing the necessity of frequent lay communion, Janov began to promote the further use of the vernacular languages in the liturgy. A few hymns and service songs had been translated into Czech thus far, and preaching in Czech could be found among the reform-minded, but Janov commenced advocating that the scriptures be read and heard in the Czech tongue. He believed that the scriptures, when heard and understood, were efficacious in spiritually nourishing the souls of the hearers. As a result, he began work on translating the Bible into Czech. Although his Czech translation is not extant, it is known through other documents.

One final predecessor to Hus should be mentioned. Tomáš z Štítné (1333-1401) was a layman who had heard Walderhauser preach and had been intimately involved with the ministries of both Milíč and Janov. He was well-educated, having studied at Prague University; and he was one of the first to write in the Czech vernacular, promoting the literary use of that language and showing that complex theological and philosophical topics could be discussed with it. Štítné also establishes the crucial tie from Janov to Hus. There is no evidence that Hus ever knew Janov: although Hus had started his Baccalaureate studies in Prague in 1390, before Janov’s death in 1393, there is no extant mention of the two ever meeting. Štítné, however, along with his daughter Anežka, did have contact with Hus through Bethlehem Chapel, the place where Hus would discharge his ministry and from which he lead the reform. Thus, it seems that Janov was able to have an impact on Hus through the influence of Štítné.

In order to properly detail the context for Hus’ liturgical developments, a few words should be said about Bethlehem Chapel. Betlemská Kaple was founded in 1391 by two wealthy lay followers of Milíč. It is a large structure, one of the largest chapels in Europe, designed to fit around 3,000 people. Its odd, non-rectangular shape is due to its utilization of all the lot’s available space in order to accommodate as many people as possible. The architectural

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21 Spinka, Biography, 17.
22 For Example, Queen Anne, married to Richard II of England, brought with her a Latin Lectionary with Czech and German translations. Spinka, Biography, 18.
24 The reader may also be interested to know that adjacent to the building, and sharing its northern wall are the rector’s living quarters. In fact, the pulpit of the chapel can only be entered from inside
features illustrate that the building itself was designed to be a place where preaching was of great importance. In fact, Bethlehem was founded for the expressed purpose of providing a location dedicated to the preaching of the word of God in the Czech language. At the time of its founding, the only place where Czech preaching could be heard in the city was at the Cathedral. By founding a private chapel, the reform party hoped to circumvent some of the jurisdictional impediments that had stalled them in the past. In the charter of the chapel, its founders stipulated:

> There exist in the city of Prague many places devoted to divine services, but these are for the greatest part used exclusively for other sacred ministrations, so that there is not a single place primarily designated for the preaching of the word of God; on the contrary… the preachers in Czech are for the most part, forced to make use of houses and hiding places – which is unworthy.²⁵

Bethlehem was intended to be, and was, a preaching station. It was a place where Praguers could come to hear sermons in Czech, even if they may have attended Mass elsewhere. Bethlehem also served as a place for the dissemination of the reform agenda. It was intended by its founders to be an ideological continuation of Milíč’s Jerusalem, and to be the de facto headquarters of the reform party. Thus as Hus succeeded Stephen of Kolin as rector of Bethlehem in 1402, he was not simply entering any ordinary ecclesiastical post. He was becoming the face and voice of the Prague reform party, and what he would say and do would have great impact upon Prague and the burgeoning Czech nation.

**Jan Hus and his liturgical development at Bethlehem**

Prior to Hus, there were no weekly or daily Masses at Bethlehem Chapel, its chief program being daily Czech sermons. Neither was there the regular participation in communion that the Prague reform had heretofore stressed. However, shortly after Hus took over, he secured an agreement with the local parish so that Masses could be celebrated daily at Bethlehem in addition to the sermon. Additionally, this agreement undoubtedly involved the payment of some money from Bethlehem to the parish, a practice already established in order to compensate for the loss in revenue due to the large numbers attending Bethlehem rather than the adjacent parish church of Sts. Phillip and James.²⁶


²⁶ The founders of the chapel had promised 90 grossi annually, and later, the parish pastor had asked for an additional 50 kopy (about 3,000 grossi). Spinka, *Biography*, 47.
These Masses likely included communion by the laity. The Prague reform had, from the time of Milíč, made frequent lay communion a staple of its emphases. In addition, as was stated previously, Bethlehem’s founders were disciples of Milíč and had intended Bethlehem to be an extension of the ministry at Jerusalem. Moreover, in 1391, a synod presided over by Archbishop Jan Jenšteijn, a new convert to the reform party himself, had removed limits on communication by the laity. Furthermore, Hus himself wrote in a letter from his imprisonment at Constance to an unknown priest that this priest should, “Exhort them to confession and to communion in both kinds of body and blood of Christ, in order that those who have truly repented of their sins would thus often come to the Lord’s table.”

It would then be unwarranted to assert, without justifying evidence, that at a chapel specifically designated as the headquarters of a reform movement, attended by many who were involved intimately in previous incarnations of that movement, and headed by a priest who wholeheartedly embraced all other aspects of that movement, that frequent lay reception of the Eucharist would have been absent. The burden of proof is upon those who would assert otherwise. Therefore, without any contradictory evidence, it is reasonable to infer that these daily Masses involved the reception of communion by all present.

Not only did Hus add the Mass to the services at Bethlehem, but he also continued the vernacular development of the liturgy as well. Hus utilized previously translated hymns and service songs such as “Hospidine pomyluj ny (Kyrie eleison),” as well as composing new hymns and translating others from Latin. Some of these Czech liturgical songs were sung by the officiants, and others were hymns sung by the entire congregation. Hus writes in his Commentary on the Decalogue that the purpose of alternating the singing and reading in the service is, “to enable both the learned and the simple folk to enjoy hearing and understanding with reason.” From his statement it is unclear whether the entire liturgy was translated into Czech, or if the songs were sung in Czech in order to illustrate what was being said in Latin by the priest. Nevertheless, Hus’ production of hymns and service songs illustrate his commitment to the use of the vernacular in the divine service.

It is also clear that the reading of the word of God in the Czech language was a part of the divine service at Bethlehem. This had been the

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27 See above.
30 See Molnar, “Liturgical Reforms,” 301, 303. The hymns written by or attributed to Hus are: “Jezu Kriste štědřy kněže (Jesus Christ, bountiful priest),” “Jesus Christus, náše spása (Jesus Christ, our salvation),” “Králi slavny, Kriste doby (Glorious King, Good Christ),” “Navštěv nás, Kriste záduci (Visit us, Christ adored),” and “Vstal jest Bůh z mrtvých svú mocí (God has risen from the dead with power).”
31 This can be seen in a certain sermon Hus preached at Bethlehem where he castigates those who would forbid the worshipers from singing together in Czech. Molnar, “Liturgical Reforms,” 299.
practice of Janov, but some have asserted that there is no evidence for the continuation of the practice. 33 Yet, Hus’ own statements made in his letters would contradict such a claim. In a letter he wrote to the people of the town of Plzeň, Hus chides the people for putting up with a priest who forbade, “the reading of the Scripture in the Czech or German vernacular.” 34 Hus also writes to Wycliffe disciple Richard Wyche, “Be assured, dearest brother, that the people wish to hear nothing but the sacred Scriptures, especially the gospel and the epistles.” 35 Moreover, Hus’ sermons were replete with scripture quotations, such that merely by preaching, much of the scripture was being disseminated in the vernacular. 36 Lastly, the same rationale given for the argument that frequent lay communion was practiced at Bethlehem can be employed here. Given the above examples and the previous emphasis on reading scripture in the vernacular by Janov, it is reasonable to infer that the scriptures were read in the vernacular at Bethlehem services. The mere lack of mention of the practice is not enough to prove its absence, for it could have been considered so commonplace that the explicit mention of the practice was not necessary but assumed. In fact, it seems so odd that the scriptures were not being read in the vernacular, that if that was not the case one would expect to find some explanation or comment as to why it was the case. Such documentary evidence does not exist within the scholarship at this time. 37

Hus’ vernacular preaching should also be mentioned as a part of his liturgical development. It is true that Hus continued the line of the reform movement leaders who preached in Czech so that the people could hear and understand. However, Hus’ preaching should not be considered outside the context of the divine service as a whole. The sermon was a part of the liturgy. The mere fact that Hus introduced the Mass and frequent lay communion along with the pre-existing divine services at the chapel shows that he believed those elements to be necessary for the spiritual nourishment of his people. In fact, Hus argues in his letters written in exile that the reason he remains in exile is so that, “the communion of the venerable sacrament and the other means to salvation,” can continue at Bethlehem. 38 In another letter he says, “I am grieved, however, that I cannot preach the Word of God, not wishing to have the divine services 39 stopped and the people distressed.” 40 Again, referring to the interdict in place against him he writes, “Perhaps they would be glad to see me in the city of Prague, in order that those who are stung by the holy preaching…

34 Spinka, Letters, 51.
35 Ibid., 47.
36 Ibid., 109-112. These are two sermons that he wrote in the form of letters while he was in exile. One could also argue that because he references so many quotations from the scriptures that he must have expected his hearers to recognize those references due to their own exposure to the same scripture passages in Czech.
37 That is not to say that it does not exist and has not yet been discovered.
38 Ibid., 76.
39 “Divine Service” is a translation of the Czech word “Bohuslužba” which is a technical term which Czechs use to refer to a corporate public worship service.
40 Ibid., 90.
could stop the hours, Masses, and other ministrations. These and many other examples show that Hus, although very passionate about his preaching, saw the sacraments and other ministrations to be of vital importance. He believed this so deeply that he refused to preach to the people in order that these other liturgical and sacramental expressions could continue. Therefore, Hus’ preaching should be considered just a part of the full-orbed liturgical expression that he developed at Bethlehem Chapel.

Conclusion

Some have asserted that Hus was not an outstanding leader in the liturgical arm of the Prague reform. I have attempted to show otherwise. The mere fact that he instituted a daily Mass at Bethlehem in addition to the daily sermon shows that he was concerned with liturgical development. In addition, Hus utilized all the aspects of liturgical development that had previously been embraced by the reform: vernacular preaching; frequent lay communion; vernacular scripture reading; and some vernacular singing. Moreover, Hus furthered the development of congregational hymn singing and other vernacular elements in the liturgy. This is no small thing, and should not be discounted. Instituting changes with regard to the Latin Mass was a major item of contention for conservatives in late medieval Catholicism. That Hus continued the pre-existing practice and even expanded its use shows him to be a leader in liturgical development.

Hus also supported the liturgical developments that would follow his death. From Constance, he writes to his successor at Bethlehem in support of the ultraquists in Prague, “Do not oppose the sacrament of the cup of the Lord which the Lord instituted through Himself.” Although Hus was wont to move slowly in this area, as well as in others, it is safe to assume that he would have eventually developed in that direction had his life not been cut short.

This thesis brings additional questions to the fore. For example, this paper focuses on the simple fact that Hus was interested in liturgical development. Further studies could delve into the question of whether or not he should be seen as a liturgical revolutionary. Another question regards the dependence of Hus and the Prague reformers on the ideas of Wycliffe. Was the Prague movement completely derivative of Wycliffe, or was it basically independent, while still taking impetus and clarification from Wycliffe’s teachings? Yet another question relates to Hus’ motivation for reform: was he motivated by nationalism and social change, or was the cure of souls his primary motivation?

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41 Ibid., 93.
43 Spinka, Letters, 181.
44 Hus was patient in his reforms. For example, he waited eight years before introducing the first Czech hymn at Bethlehem. This should not be taken as reluctance, but patience and care to preserve the unity and peace of the church.
Today, Hus is largely seen as a preacher, while his liturgical and sacramental emphases are downplayed. This should not be the case. Hus was clearly interested in liturgical development and did not promote vernacular preaching at expense of liturgy and sacraments as did others. While he believed vernacular preaching to be of utmost importance, he also saw it to be a part of a larger whole. This whole included the full ministry of a priest. For him, preaching must be dispensed within the context of a full liturgical expression and the administration of the sacraments. Only then could preaching reach its full potential within the hearts and lives of the Christian faithful.