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John Wyclif's *Postilla* in Fifteenth-Century Bohemia

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THE DISCOVERY of John Wyclif's *Postilla* is of recent date. Although scholars had been aware of this text since the middle of the nineteenth century—W. W. Shirley had indicated that it was listed in two early fifteenth-century catalogues of Wyclif's writings—an incomplete manuscript of the *Postilla* was positively identified only in 1924.¹ We owe this identification to the Austrian scholar Johann Loserth, who came upon the postillated New Testament in the collection of Wyclif manuscripts in Vienna.² Soon thereafter, in 1937, S. Harrison Thomson located three additional manuscripts of the same work in Prague and, finally, in 1953 Miss Smalley brought to light five-eighths of the *Postilla* she had found in Oxford.³

In presenting his discovery Professor Thomson expressed the view that "this voluminous work merits special study and eventual publication," and added that "it is remarkable for its moderation on controversial points, sacraments, power of the keys, etc. . . ." He emphasized, moreover, "the evangelical tone and the confident serenity discernible in Wyclif's treatment of the New Testament," but he did not enter upon a more detailed analysis of the text.⁴

In contrast with Professor Thomson's brief commentary, Miss Smalley has dealt not only with the delicate problem of authorship—a task in which ultra-violet rays played an important part⁵—but has also scrutinized passages in which the tone of the postillator betrayed dissenting tendencies from current and accepted views of his time. Taking Miss Smalley for our

1. W. W. Shirley, *A Catalogue of the Original Works of John Wyclif* (Oxford, 1865), pp. 62, 69.

2. Johann Loserth (ed.), *Shirley's Catalogue of the Original Works of John Wyclif* (London: Wyclif Society, 1924), p. 11.

3. S. Harrison Thomson, "Unnoticed MSS and Works of Wyclif," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 38 (1937), p. 35. Beryl Smalley, "John Wyclif's *Postilla super totam Bibliam*," *The Bodleian Library Record*, 4 (1953), pp. 186–205.

4. Thomson, "Unnoticed MSS and Works of Wyclif," p. 35.

5. The user or owner of the Oxford *Postilla* has so diligently besmudged Wyclif's name as to make it illegible to the eye. This was not an uncommon reaction on the part of his Oxford readers. V. H. Galbraith was the first to draw our attention to these expressions of resentment in Oxford. In *The St. Albans Chronicle 1406–1420* (edited from Bodley MS 462; Oxford, 1937), p. 47, he found Wyclif's title "*sacre pagine professor*" mutilated into "*sacre pagine perversor*," and in 1940 Aubrey Gwynn confirmed this hostile attitude in *The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wyclif* (Oxford, 1940), pp. 236–239 and 253–254. There we read about Adam Stockton, who, following a change of heart in 1380 or 1381, decided to cross out the words "*venerabilis doctor*," that he had attached previously to Wyclif's name in one of his anti-papal tracts, and replaced them with "*execrabilis seductor*."

guide, we note that the postillator (Wyclif) discusses apostolic poverty, the figurative sense of Scripture, and presents the defence of "the language of Scripture against the charge of paying no regard to logic."⁶ We are then introduced to the interpretation of Cant. vi. 10–vii. 1 and we read about "the kings and priests who burden the lesser members of the Church as though they were laden chariots." There is, the postillator continues, need for reform.⁷ The papacy is attacked next. It is here that Wyclif alludes to early Christian times and remembers that the apostles were called *fratres et socii*. From this period he distinguishes the present days in which "*oportet vocare papam patrem sanctissimum et quemlibet cardinalem reverendissimum dominum*."⁸ He then makes it clear that he considers Christ's divinity as the head of the Church and propounds the view that "whoever is ordained priest or prelate does not derive his power (*potestas*) from the authority (*auctoritas*) of the apostle [Peter] or his successors but rather from the authority of Christ and/or [*vel*] the Church, by the latter virtue of Christ, its head."⁹ In the presence of this statement, we must conclude that the postillator was heading towards dangerous ground.

In view of so belated a discovery of manuscripts of this little-known but important text, it is not without interest to note that short excerpts from Wyclif's *Postilla* have been in print since the sixteenth century. We owe them to Ioannes Cochlaeus, an apologist and theologian of the Lutheran faith, who included in a massive tome, together with his *Historiae Hussitarum* and several treatises related to the beginnings of the Reformation, a religious tract of John Rokycana on the seven sacraments.¹⁰ There, in its penultimate chapter, entitled *Testimonium Ioann. Vuiclephi de VII. Sacramentis*, we find that Rokycana's testimony is in fact taken from several of Wyclif's postills (as Miss Smalley labels the individual section of the *Postilla super totam Bibliam*).¹¹

John Rokycana has recently been introduced to the English speaking community of Church historians but his life and work in Bohemia of post-Hussite times are still largely unknown.¹² In the "Galilee of the churches,"

6. Smalley, "John Wyclif's *Postilla super totam Bibliam*," pp. 191, 192.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 194 and 196. Wyclif's use of the words *auctoritas* and *potestas* is worth noting. There is a long history behind them since the times of Pope Gelasius I (492–496), who was the first to speak of the *auctoritas* of the Church and the *potestas* of the secular ruler. Cf. Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages* (2nd ed., London, 1962), pp. 20–22.

10. *Tractatus Magistri Ioannis Rokyzanae Bohemi, De Septem Sacramentis Ecclesiae* in Ioannes Cochlaeus, *Historiae Hussitarum Libri Duodecim* (Mainz, 1549), pp. 442–500. The MSS of Rokycana were collected by F. M. Bartoš, *The Literary Activity of M. Jan Rokycana, M. Jan Pšibram and M. Peter Payne* (Prague, 1928), pp. 22–23 (in Czech). Rokycana's borrowings from Wyclif's *Postilla* did not escape the attention of František Simek, *The Doctrinal Views of Master Jan Rokycana* (Prague, 1938), p. 215 (in Czech), but he does not discuss this particular text.

11. *De septem sacramentis*, pp. 498–499. Smalley, "John Wyclif's *Postilla super totam Bibliam*," p. 187.

12. Peter Brock, *The Political and Social Doctrines of the Unity of Czech Brethren in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries* ('S-Gravenhage, 1957), especially pp. 71–76 and 88–90. Frederick G. Heymann devoted to Rokycana two articles. In "John

as Ronald Knox once felicitously described Bohemia, Rokycana represented the Utraquist church and, within that body, together with the believers, he strove to maintain the Hussite tradition as it had developed under his guidance following the death of his great master.¹³ He was opposed to manifestations and expressions of extreme religious views, and thus was never able to harmonize his ideals with those of the Taborites, the radicals of the Hussite revolution. Nevertheless, he shared with them the same admiration for Wyclif.

John Rokycana was a Wyclifist—of a sort. Although he never embraced radical Wyclifism as preached by Peter Payne, he also never disavowed Wyclif, and on one occasion at least he showed himself as Wyclif's defender. He dismissed, for instance, allegations that Wyclif has taught the doctrine of *remanentia* in the eucharist with the brief explanation "*Loquitur Wiclif scholastice,*" a sophistic explanation, we may judge, which tenuously attempted to separate Wyclif's teaching in the schools (where there was always greater toleration of radical doctrinal pronouncements than the Church would allow elsewhere) from the doctrinal theories of his works.¹⁴

Determined to heal the wounds opened by religious strife and dissension, he would enter theological controversy only under stress, and concentrated instead on the revival of religious life and the re-affirmation of Christian moral ideals.¹⁵ Anxious to establish religious peace among the Czechs, he exercised restraint even in issues that mattered most to him: Were it not for an occasional condemnation of the *sacerdotes moderni* (the Taborites), and their abuse of the sacraments, *De septem sacramentis* would read like a florilegium of testimonials in favour of the sacraments taken from a wide range of authors—Origen to Richard Fitzralph of Armagh.¹⁶

So it is scarcely surprising that in *De septem sacramentis* we look in vain

Rokycana—Church Reformer between Hus and Luther," *Church History*, 28 (1959), pp. 240–280, he discussed his theology and sketched his life, and in "The Hussite-Utraquist Church in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 52 (1961), pp. 1–16, he placed Rokycana in the larger context of the religious movement in Bohemia. In Czech literature Rokycana has been the subject of many thorough investigations. His role in fifteenth-century Czech religious history is clearly delineated in Rudolf Urbánek, *Czech History*, Vol. III, Parts i–iii (Prague, 1915–30; in Czech). There is an excellent account in Joseph Th. Müller's *Geschichte der Böhmischesen Brüder* (Herrnhut, 1922), pp. 46–71.

13. Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm* (New York, 1950), p. 89.

14. Simek, *The Doctrinal Views of Master Jan Rokycana*, p. 221, note 1.

15. Rokycana's fulminations were directed especially against the town-dwellers and squires whose moral failings and shallow religiosity he criticized time and again in his Czech *Postilla*. František Simek (ed.), *John Rokycana's Postilla* (2 vols., Prague, 1928–1929), *passim*.

16. Rokycana's main authority is Pseudo-Dionysius' *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*. He quotes from the pseudo-Clementines, St. Cyprian, St. Basil of Caesarea, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, St. Chrysostom, Bede, St. Isidore of Seville, Hrabanus Maurus, Paschasius Radbertus, Remigius of Auxerre, Hugo of St. Victor, Grosseteste, and St. Albert the Great. From the Hussite theologians Rokycana mentions only his teacher Master Iacobellus of Mies (Jakoubek ze Stříbra), the founder of the Utraquist Church.

To the *sacerdotes moderni* Rokycana addresses the following reproach: "Nostri autem moderni sacerdotes, ignari legis Dei & scripturarum, plus heu praesumunt quam intelligunt, sine omni timore Dei, id quod placet, sine fundamento stabili scripturae attentantes" (*De septem sacramentis*, p. 455).

for complex theological arguments. Rokycana's aim was, above all, to instruct the *sacerdotes simplices*: he criticized, for example, "the many and tortuous arguments propounded, according to their scholastic habit, by Thomas of Aquinas and Duns Scotus"—arguments, as he believed, "which led only to weariness and perplexity of the priests' minds." Moreover, as he did not fail to observe, they were too involved and the simple priests were incapable of grasping them.¹⁷

Rokycana did not write this work only for the Utraquists. Remembering that the book is dedicated to "our fatherland, that is the Czech people," and is written "to honour God, the welfare of Holy Mother Church and his own conscience," we may discern behind the lines the ever present concern of Rokycana's political and religious life: the national and religious unity of the Czech people.¹⁸ This preoccupation may account for the inclusion of Wyclyf's sanction of the sacraments in *De septem sacramentis*. It may be recalled that to many, though not all, Czechs, Wyclyf was still *doctor evangelicus*; and so Wyclyf's endorsement of the sacraments, Rokycana may have thought, if, in fact, he was not convinced, was essential for the establishment of a harmoniously co-operating church in Bohemia.¹⁹ The evidence supplied by Rokycana concerning Wyclyf's stand on the sacraments adds a new dimension to the analysis of Miss Smalley who, as we have observed, had discussed above all Wyclyf's affirmations bearing on the power of the Pope within the Church.

In *De septem sacramentis* Rokycana presented Wyclyf as an orthodox theologian rather than a dissident. Leaving aside Wyclyf's doubts on the Pope's power of the keys, Rokycana lifted those parts of the *Postilla* from the text that not only had relevance to his own work on the sacraments but, moreover, showed approval of the Church sacraments by the venerated master of Hus. Among his four quotations from Wyclyf's postills, the first one—excerpted from the postill on Mark 15—which allegorically describes the sacraments in feudal military terms, is undoubtedly the most expressive. The dry style of Wyclyf, which has been so often deplored by his modern commentators, is not noticeable in the colourful description of the seven sacraments.²⁰ Wyclyf compares them to a castle with its fortifications, the surrounding stream resembles baptism, the moat and walls stand for confirmation and penance, the tower which is reached by steps of ordination is the eucharist, the bailey signifies matrimony, and the gate (*ostiolum*) through which we enter into eternal life symbolizes extreme unction. "And this system of defences," Wyclyf adds, "was founded by Christ who gave power to the priests to erect them everywhere."²¹

17. *De septem sacramentis*, p. 465.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 445 and 446.

19. Johann Loserth, *Wiclif und Huss* (2nd ed., Munich, 1925), pp. 1 and 196. Urbánek, *Czech History*, Vol. I, p. 825 and Vol. III, p. 616.

20. However, we have a recent dissenter in the person of Howard Kaminsky who "has been continually delighted by his dry, biting, acidity." See "Wyclifism as Ideology of Revolution," *Church History*, 32 (1963), pp. 57-74, esp. pp. 58 and 70, note 7.

21. *De septem sacramentis*, p. 498. "Sacramenta Ecclesie sunt uelut castrum & munitio tutissima, quam uelut fluuius immensus primo circuit aqua Baptismatis, quae primo

The remaining three references to Wyclif's postills selected by Rokycana deal with penance, extreme unction, and the nature of the sacraments. Wyclif's definitions of the two sacraments are in harmony with the doctrine of the Church, and their inclusion in *De septem sacramentis* may have had the purpose of weakening Taborite opposition to their inclusion among the sacraments in general.²² This view can be supported by Rokycana's third selection taken from Wyclif's postill on Corinthians i, 1, which states directly that "*omnia Sacramenta sunt Christi. . .*" Rokycana then speaks of those instituted by Christ himself (since they were more difficult to be believed in and more necessary for salvation) and those instituted by the Apostles, such as confirmation and extreme unction. And to round up his argument against the Taborites, Rokycana reminds his audience, on the basis of the last chapter of St. John's Gospel, that not every work of Christ is revealed in the Scriptures. In addition, he refers to Wyclif's view that the Four Evangelists were anxious to inform the believers only of those works which were essential for salvation and necessary for the welfare of the Church. And with this testimony Rokycana abandons Wyclif as his source.²³

Our two sources for the knowledge of Wyclif's *Postilla* are the fragments of the postills discussed by Miss Smalley, and Rokycana's excerpts in *De septem sacramentis*. They present a minor problem of reconciliation: each shows a different Wyclif. Miss Smalley has put in relief Wyclif's inquisitive approach to the nature of the papacy and was fully justified in describing Wyclif of the *Postilla* as "a Hercules at the crossroads."²⁴ However, Rokycana's selections indicate that in 1372-78—accepting Miss Smalley's carefully established chronology—Wyclif may not have reached the crossroads yet.²⁵

Although the late R. R. Betts was openly sceptical of the relevance of this still unpublished text to our understanding of Wyclifism as a social

coercet accessus hostiles. In interioribus ripis fluminis, sunt Confirmatio & Poenitentia, uelut uallus & murus exterior. In medio autem uelut turris fortissima, Sacramentum Eucharistiae collocatur, ad quam ascenditur per gradus ordinis. Et citra hos gradus, Matrimonium quasi murus interior, defendens legitime forum saeculare & Ecclesiasticum. Ostiolum autem, per quod ingreditur uitam futuram, est Extrema Vnctio. Sed & totam istam seriem castrorum fundauit Christus, dans uicariis potestatem ubique erigendi."

In the margin we read Cochlaeus' or the printer's remark: "Elegans descriptio Castrorum Ecclesiae per VII. Sacramenta."

22. Wyclif's view of the sacrament of penance is taken from the postill on the Epistle of James, v.: "Oportet recipere Sacramentum Poenitentiae pro mortalibus abluendis: confitendo non solum Deum, sed et homini in casu. Et cum specialiter confitendum sit uicario Christi, qui mediat inter Deum et hominem, ordinarunt posteri confessionem auricularem."

Wyclif's definition of extreme unction comes from the postill on I Corinthians, i.: "Est enim Extrema unctio signum efficacax, & finalis, & uniuersalis remissionis peccatorum, per unctionem infirmi poenitentis, indeterminatis partibus, cum oleo oliuae, ab Episcopo consecrato, ministrato a sacerdote, uerba cum intentione debita proferente" (*De septem sacramentis*, pp. 498-499). Cf. "Decretum pro Armenis (de sacramentis)" issued by Pope Eugenius IV in the bull *Exultate Deo* of 22 November 1439, in H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (31st ed. by Carolus Rahner, Barcelona, 1960), pp. 253-259.

23. *De septem sacramentis*, p. 498.

24. Smalley, "John Wyclif's *Postilla super totam Bibliam*," p. 205.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 187 and 203-204.

movement, the "complete" Wyclif may easily elude us if we fail to listen to the tone of this *Postilla*, written during the most formative years of his life.²⁶ Betts's is, however, an isolated opinion. Miss Smalley remarked that, "Had Wyclif kept quiet, his *Postilla* would doubtless have become a classic"; and Professor Thomson, stressing above all, as we already know, "the evangelical tone" and "confident serenity" in those parts of the *Postilla* he found in Prague, pleaded (in vain) for its publication.²⁷ In view of the twofold nature of Wyclif's statements, only a complete published text will tell us what Wyclif was concerned with in 1372-78.

26. R. R. Betts, "Correnti religiose nazionali ed ereticalli dalla fine del secolo XIV alla metà del XV," *Relazioni di X Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Storiche* (Firenze, 1955), Vol. III, p. 489.

27. Smalley, "John Wyclif's *Postilla super totam Bibliam*," p. 205. It is unfortunate that J. A. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools* (Cambridge, 1961), refers to the text without investigating it. See also note 4.