Jan Hus as a Preacher

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The phenomenal figure of Jan Hus the preacher – prolific, dedicated, and riveting – did not come like a bolt from the blue. On the contrary, Hus’s preaching must be seen as a part of an accelerated development of sacred rhetoric in fourteenth-century Bohemia. It is true that Hus’s success in the pulpit of Bethlehem Chapel certainly exceeded any response that previous preachers had met. However, this kind of response would hardly have been possible without the achievements of preachers in the decades prior to the appointment of Jan Hus as a Bethlehem rector. In this respect, Hus’s success represents a culmination of the aforementioned development. These changes that preceded Hus included an increased emphasis on the dissemination of the Word of God in the religious practice of late medieval Bohemia, which produced new benefices for preachers that in turn brought about a higher frequency of preaching. This was accompanied by the emergence of specialized training and an increase in the availability of sermon literature. Consequently, at the beginning of the fifteenth century preaching looked completely different from how it had looked a hundred years earlier. Let us consider the quantitative data alone. Only a few sermon collections of Bohemian origin survive from the time before the mid-fourteenth century, and their authors tended to come from either the monastic circles or the episcopate. The Homiliary of Opatovice dates back to the twelfth century, and from the thirteenth century there survives another sermon collection composed by Robert, bishop of Olomouc. From the early fourteenth century we have sermons by a few prominent members of religious orders, such as the Cistercian Peter of Zittau or the Hospitaller Henry of Varnsdorf. Nevertheless, the second half of the fourteenth century suddenly witnessed a boom in preaching activity, as well as in the creation of sermon manuscripts.1

With the end of the ‘grey period in the history of medieval preaching,’ ca. 1350,2 the number of known preachers and preserved sermon manuscripts

explodes. Even just a cursory survey of published inventories returns impressive figures. F.M. Bartoš described some ninety sermon collections in his study of pre-Hussite and Hussite postils. Supplements from the two volumes of Pavel Spunar’s Repertorium yield a total of one hundred and forty sermon collections of Bohemian origin from the period 1350–1450 (not speaking of individual sermons, mostly those delivered to the clergy). Naturally, these collections vary in length and style, and they achieved unequal circulation. The number of individual sermons contained in those collections can be only roughly estimated to reach over ten thousand. Though further research may exclude some of the collections as having been written earlier than the period in question (for instance, imported models merely copied by a Bohemian scribe), the overall image of dramatically increased preaching activity is not likely to change. Admittedly, compared to thirteenth-century sermon production in western Europe, the Bohemian figures may appear scanty. Nicole Bériou’s calculation based on J.B. Schneyer’s Repertorium results in an estimate of one hundred thousand Latin sermons composed in Europe from 1200 to ca. 1350. Yet students of later medieval preaching usually work with a more limited pool of collections. Thus, for late medieval northern France, Hervé Martin estimates the number of surviving manuscript sermons to the tens of thousands. He counts 922 active preachers recorded between 1350–1450, but works with a selection of twenty-four collections containing 773 sermons. Siegfried Wenzel’s magisterial survey of Latin sermon collections from England during the same period lists thirty-six items, with thirty-two ‘major’ collections containing


4 I use the ratio derived from Hus’s edited collections, which on average include around eighty sermons each.
