

The Biblical Theology of Petr Chelčický (1379-1458) and Its Influence on the Radical Reformation

L. ALAN EYRE

In a remote area of the Bohemian mountains of the Czech Republic, in the little farm village of Chelčice, is a statue of a man holding a Bible. The man so honored is Petr Chelčický (pronounced Kelchisky). Hardly anyone outside the Czech Republic knows anything, even now, about Petr Chelčický. He was a prolific writer, but since he wrote only in Czech, and lived in days before the printing press (in Europe), his writings have been largely ignored by scholars outside his native land. But what Petr Chelčický did was unique for his age, a time when the domination of the Roman Catholic Church over Europe was almost total. For Chelčický was born nearly a century and a half before Luther's Protestant Reformation and before the Brüder in Cristo made their brave decision to organize in Zürich, Switzerland in 1525. What Petr Chelčický did was to guide and lead a group of believers, totally separate from the Roman Catholic Church. Their faith and way of life were based on the Bible alone, and a deliberate effort was made to base their doctrine and practice upon the first-century, apostolic model. The special interest attached to Petr Chelčický's group is that he left a uniquely detailed written account of the efforts he and his friends made to go back to the Bible for their foundation. More than fifty published or manuscript works have survived, all in the Czech language. Only two of them have ever been translated into English.¹

¹ The two texts were translated by Howard Kaminsky in 1964. See *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 1, 105-179.

I. ANTECEDENTS

At the time of Petr Chelčický's birth, two currents of religious thought were disturbing Catholic Bohemia. Both challenged papal orthodoxy, but in very different ways, and the second was far more radical than the first.

From England came the fame and teachings of John Wycliffe (1320-1384). This was a scholarly influence, mediated mainly through smuggled manuscripts, Czech students such as Jerome of Prague who had known Wycliffe in Oxford, clerics who had visited England, and a few Lollards who came to Bohemia, among them Peter Payne.² Wycliffism had a direct impact on church life in Bohemia when Jan Hus adopted some aspects of his ecclesiology but not his eucharistic doctrines.³ Chelčický was a young man of twenty-three when Jan Hus was appointed chaplain of the Bethlen Chapel in Prague, and thirty-five when Hus's major works in Czech began to be circulated widely. By this time Chelčický's personal theology was already formed, and the Hussite revolution was more of an environment than an influence. From 1420, when the militant millennialist wing of the Hussites established the theocratic fortress town of Tábor, Chelčický became a determined opponent of such "liberation theology" and urged his followers to repudiate revolutionary politics.⁴

The second religious antecedent which influenced southern Bohemia in the late fourteenth century derived from the Vaudois. The Vaudois were biblical and separatist rather than ecclesiastical and reformist. Vaudois preachers were active in the Chelčice area.⁵ There are detailed reports of heresy trials, although the authenticity of at least some of these have been questioned.⁶ However, there are so many convergences of thought between Chelčický and the Vaudois, and so many biblical doctrines are shared, that some influence of Vaudois teaching on Chelčický seems inescapable.⁷

² Peter Payne certainly met Petr Chelčický, and it has even been somewhat implausibly suggested that they became friends. See Pavel Šafařík, *Časopis českého musea*, 48, 1874, 107.

³ Murray Wagner, *Petr Chelčický, A Radical Separatist in Hussite Bohemia*, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983, 29.

⁴ *O Boji Duchovním*, Petru (1966 edn.), 26-98.

⁵ Amedeo Molnár and Giovanni Gonnet, *Les Vaudois au Moyen Age*, Turin, 1974, 154-156.

⁶ Alexander Patschovsky, *Die Anfänge einer Ständigen Inquisition in Böhmen*, Berlin, 1975, 202.

⁷ Wagner, 55.

Whatever influence Wycliffe, Jerome of Prague, Hus and the Vaudois had, the paramount factor in molding the thought and vision of young Petr Chelčický in his twenties was the Bible in Czech. Whoever was the artist who made the statue in Chelčice, he was right. Chelčický is represented with his right hand resting firmly on a hand-written copy of the Holy Scriptures (then very expensive and valuable) in his beloved mother tongue.⁸ It can hardly be doubted that it was his reading of the Bible which shaped his thinking and theology more than anything else. His prolific writings may have been computer-analyzed in an effort to discern subtle antecedent influences, but his personal scriptural convictions are writ far too large to ever be minimized. Above all else, Petr Chelčický sought truth directly from the word of God.

Like their heretical predecessors, the Chelčice Brethren knew the Scriptures thoroughly. They studied the New Testament and were led in the process to either doubt or reject the most sacrosanct doctrines of the Catholic Church . . . He [Chelčický] and his colleagues read the Bible and became convinced Christian separatists.⁹

II. BIBLE READING

Petr Chelčický's maternal uncle Hostislav was a priest in the city of Krumlov, and Petr, who was orphaned in childhood, is believed to have lived with his uncle and used the parish library in Krumlov. This library was well endowed with manuscripts and must have had a copy of the Scriptures in the vernacular, even if Chelčický did not possess one himself in his youth.

Chelčický was forty-three when his first literary work was completed — a treatise entitled *O Boji Duchovním* (On Spiritual Warfare). More than fifty lengthy works followed, his last known manuscript being *Výklad na Otčenáš* (Exposition of the Lord's Prayer) in 1457, thirty-five years later. As with most religious separatists and sectarians, most of Chelčický's output was polemic in character, written with the passion of immediacy, as a particular religious problem came into his view or affected his south Bohemian congregations.

⁸ In the early 15th century Czech linguistic nationalism in the face of the deliberate Germanization of the Bohemian lands was intense.

⁹ Wagner, 45.

The most extensive work, the *Postilla*, is a collection of fifty-nine exhortations on the Bible readings for each Sunday. These were read aloud at the Chelčice assembly, and then circulated to other nearby congregations. Murray Wagner, one of the very few non-communist scholars to have studied Chelčický's work this century and recognized its significance, comments on these exhortations in the *Postilla*:

In each, he expounded one of the dominant themes of his sectarian Christianity. Chelčický was all but certain that there could be no true Christians amid the opulent pageantry of official religion. To Chelčický, the man of the soil, the ostentatious decor of the ceremonials was no more than a pompous front for the church's pretentious piety. True believers were those who took up the burden of discipleship in humility and submission. Those whom Petr deemed to be worthy of the name Christian are the pure in heart, obeying God's commands, not out of coercion, or from fear of hell, but in willing response to God's love. He wrote that all who understood the law of God, bear it willingly and quietly as an obligation, living so as the faith may not be barren, empty and dead, are the "elect of God," whose congregation is the eternal church.¹⁰

Petr Chelčický's assiduous Bible-reading regimen, his rejection of Roman Catholic rituals and dogmas, the refusal of his fellowship to participate in war and other political concerns, his insistence on the Bible alone as the standard of truth and the life of the Lord Jesus as the example for daily living, meant that between Chelčický and the prevailing religious world there could be no possibility of compromise or conciliation.

Nor was it possible to evangelize, at least openly. At that time the king of Bohemia was the Holy Roman Emperor, and Prague was the political capital of Europe. Nevertheless, the old Czech archives reveal a man who positively revelled in his Bible reading, was touched by it, and accepted the consequences of his convictions.¹¹ For his day and age, he was, humanly speaking, very fortunate. He lived a full span of life, without martyrdom. He was only once arrested and questioned for heresy. Probably in his remote rural province he was not considered much of a threat.

¹⁰ Wagner, 127.

¹¹ L. Alan Eyre, "The Czech Farmer-Precacher and His Bible," *The Christadelphian*, 125, 1988, 252-254.

III. BASIS OF FAITH

Although doctrinal statements of various kinds abound in Chelčický's writings, no succinct creed or basis of faith occurs, although one or more are clearly assumed throughout. Following both Palacký and Molnár,¹² one can surmise with some probability that whatever formal credal basis was adopted, it would be akin to, and essentially reflect, one or more of those current among the Valdenci of south Bohemia, in which case it would include the following:

We believe that there is one God, who is a Spirit, and the Creator of all things; who is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth; Him we love as the author of all good, and fear Him as the discerner of our hearts.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son and image of the Father, in whom dwells all the fulness of the Godhead; by whom we know the Father; who is our Mediator and Advocate; and there is no other name under heaven given unto men, whereby we may be saved.

We believe that Christ is our Way, Truth, Peace, Righteousness, Shepherd, Advocate, Sacrifice, and High Priest; who died for the salvation of those who believe, and was raised from the dead for our justification.

We maintain that there is no other mediator with God the Father than Jesus Christ. As regards the virgin Mary, we hold that she was holy, humble and full of grace. We believe that she and all other saints wait as we do for the resurrection of the body in the day of judgment.

We believe in a holy church, the congregation of all believers from the foundation of the world unto the end. The head of this church is the Lord Jesus Christ. This church is governed by the Word of God, outside of which church there is no salvation.¹³

Such simple, pre-conciliar biblical theology is echoed throughout the Chelčický corpus, both in concept and language.

IV. PREDOMINANT THEMES

Seven predominant themes can be identified in Chelčický's theology which anticipated and subsequently influenced in one way or another the

¹² František Palacký, *Die Geschichte von des Hussitenthums und Prof. Constantin Höfler Kritische Studien*, Prague, 1868; Amedeo Molnár, *Valdenští, Evropský rozměr jejich vzdoru*, Prague, 1973.

¹³ Alan Eyre, *Dopis mému českému příteli. Svědectví Pravé Víry*, Punchbowl, Australia, 1992.

Radical Reformation in Europe. Despite the forty-year time spread of his writings, there is far more evidence of deepening conviction on all these themes than of changing standpoint. There is little indication that he drastically modified *any* theological issue during his long life.

1. Primitive apostolic Christianity was separatist in theology.

Chelčický's disenchantment with the religious establishment of the time was total. Few religious writers used more ink in vilifying as unholy the religious systems of privilege and power. He insisted that Jesus Christ had not instituted the church as being coexistent with society, or as an interlocking network of religious and secular officials (priests and rulers), or as an earthly theocratic system, but as a gathered church, as it has been termed in modern times, a fellowship of believers organized apart from the world, living a clearly visible life of discipleship. "The church is the spiritual body of Christ, which is led by the Holy Spirit, and which functions through its many members . . . The true church consists of those, and only of those, who have heard and recognized the truth."¹⁴ It is a union of uncoerced believers.

2. Coercion of the godly conscience by force is sinful.

Chelčický was among the very first after Constantine the Great to insist that the power of the secular state should never be invoked to coerce the godly conscience.¹⁵ Executioners might be, he averred, God's ministers guarding public morals and curbing wickedness in the world at large, but they far exceed their divine mandate when they wield capital power over private faith. This concept, so basic to Euro-American democracy and western liberal culture, was utterly at variance with the notion of the divine harmony of the Catholic Church and imperial state on which the concept of the Holy Roman Empire was based. We may see Chelčický as a true pioneer of the American-style religious landscape.

3. Conscientious objection to military service.

In his application of Jesus' teaching on non-resistance to evil, and acceptance of suffering and persecution as a consequence, Chelčický insisted with vigorous, unwavering single-mindedness on the conscientious stand taken in modern times by Mennonites, Quakers, Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Dozens of pages in many of

¹⁴ *Postilla*, I, 3.

¹⁵ *O trojiem lidu řeč*, Petru, 128/831.

his works redound to this theme. Holy war as sanctioned, demanded and practiced by Catholic Austrians and Hussite Czechs alike, which left Bohemia a devastated shambles, was to this simple follower of Jesus nothing but “hideous murder” licensed by the blood-stained Whore of Babylon.¹⁶

4. Over-enthusiastic millennialism is unsettling to faith.

The entire Czech nation was agog in February 1420, as the Hussite “warriors of God” confidently predicted the return of Christ before the end of the month. Intensive study of Bible prophecy was engaged in from university lecture rooms in Prague to the barrack rooms of the Táborský garrison. The clash between the Holy Roman Empire and the oppressed Czech people was viewed in apocalyptic terms, with the hosts of Gog and Magog swooping down upon the elect of God. The extremes of enthusiasm worried Chelčický. He saw that distorted Scriptures, wrenched from their context, terrified the people. He urged calm in the excitement, contending that a holy life based upon serious commitment to producing the fruit of the Spirit was a far better preparation for the second coming of Christ and the Kingdom of God — whenever the great Day should occur — than wild excitement followed by disillusionment. The similarities in causation and sequelae between 1420 and the “Great Disappointment” of 1844 are very striking.¹⁷

5. Belief, then baptism.

It was inevitable that a serious plea for an individualistic biblical faith in place of mere ritualism would lead to the view that baptism is an act of faith, not an ecclesiastical sacrament.¹⁸ The theology for believers’ baptism was laid by Chelčický and later adopted by the Brethren on a formal basis.¹⁹

6. Separation from the world is moral.

Withdrawal from “the world” is not mysticism or monasticism, but a motivation to create an independent church life based upon spiritual

¹⁶ *O boji duchovním*, Petrů, 41/460.

¹⁷ Peter Hemingray, “Scenes from the Truth in America,” *The Christadelphian Tidings*, 1995, 505ff. This continuing series is a detailed study from a Christadelphian standpoint of the rise of millennial sects following the Great Disappointment.

¹⁸ *Z právy o svátostech*, Molnár, 17/121a.

¹⁹ Antonín Lenz, “Učení Petra Chelčického o křtu,” *Časopis českého musea*, 59, 1885, 75ff.

principles where individual and corporate experience is modeled on the life and example of our Savior. Separation is from the spirit of the world, not its daily manifestations; these must be challenged and brought into subjection to the Master's discipline and calling.

7. The Lord's Supper.

Chelčický's eucharistic doctrine is practical rather than mystical. Rejecting transubstantiation as crass superstition, it also scorns the view that the Lord's Supper is nothing more than a fellowship meal lacking divine power.²⁰ Chelčický abhorred as the grossest idolatry the contemporary practice of presenting the wafer for veneration in public squares. He felt similarly about the practice of both Imperial and Hussite (Utraquist) armies of elevating both elements in the van beside the standards as they marched into battle. The essence of the eucharist is spiritual *brotherhood*, and its consequence an *equality* of love and service which breaks down for the believer every social barrier — a concept centuries ahead of its time.²¹

V. CHELČICKÝ AS PROPHET

Chelčický quite consciously sought to be the combined voice of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos and Micah to his generation. Echoing constantly the language of the social prophets of the Old Testament, he inveighed relentlessly against the glaring injustices of his age. Outrage at the hypocrisy of a brutal, oppressive, and tyrannical society, which claimed to be thoroughly Christian yet made a public spectacle of destroying saintly men and women to defend the power and privileges of a venal clergy, always burned in Petr Chelčický's soul. The financial obligations imposed on the helpless poor by rich and powerful clerical rulers and secular elites, backed by the police powers of the state, were to Chelčický a fulfillment of Ezekiel 34 and John 10, with false and wicked shepherds fattening themselves at the expense of the common people and cruelly exploiting them from the cradle to the grave (and beyond!) for unholy gain.

The *Siet' viery* (Net of Faith) is Chelčický's most mature work. In my view, the closest parallel to Chelčický, in theme, style and even

²⁰ Erhard Peschke, *Die Theologie der Böhmishe Brüder in ihrer Frühzeit*, Stuttgart, 1940.

²¹ *Siet' viery*, 27,14a.

vocabulary, in more modern separatist religious literature are the writings of the Christadelphian pioneer John Thomas (1805-1871). The similarities between the *Siet' viery* and the editorials and articles by Thomas in *The Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come* and in *The Faith in the Last Days* are most striking.²²

Chelčický viewed the new universities of Europe with great distrust. He saw the theological faculties as whorish handmaidens to pope and emperor, prelates and monks. The masters were “pedantic logicians” whose “tortured reasoning merely subverts the simple truths of the gospel to the great satisfaction of antichrist.”²³ Born of and defended by human sophistry, all Roman Catholic dogma, he asserted with fierce conviction, was blasphemy — the doctrine of purgatory above all.²⁴ The earnest seeker for truth will always turn to the oracles of God, to the simple apostolic gospel as enshrined in the Holy Scriptures.

VI. CHELČICKÝ'S INFLUENCE ON THE RADICAL REFORMATION

The independent Chelčice fellowship in south Bohemia was not the only separatist group in Catholic Europe in the first half of the fifteenth century. Historians of the present-day church of the Waldesi have identified congregations of their actual and spiritual Vaudois forefathers in the Alps of Savoie.²⁵ Future research will no doubt find other cells of Christians who were convinced that their faith was based on uncomplicated allegiance to the primitive gospel of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, because they were viewed by the religious establishment as unspeakable heretics unfit to live, the sectarians of Chelčice were inevitably an ephemeral feature on the religious landscape of Europe.

Petr Chelčický was, or perhaps eventually became, an historical pessimist: he believed that any and every effort to revive “the Truth” out of the morass of the Apostacy would be ruthlessly crushed by the Antichrist until his (or its) power to make war on the saints was finally removed by the appearing in glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. He believed that persecution of the saints was, and is, inevitable and a testing by God of their constancy. So he did not expect the fellowship he founded to survive long, at least in organized, recognizable form.

²² *Herald of the Kingdom and Age to Come*, Richmond, VA, 1851 ff; *The Faith in the Last Days*, Birmingham, England, 1965.

²³ *Siet' viery*, II, 15-16.

²⁴ *Replika proti Rokycanovi*, Černý, 400.

²⁵ Giorgio Tourn, *The Waldensians: The First Eight Hundred Years*, Turin, 1980.

For that very reason, he was delighted when as a rugged, feisty old man of seventy-eight, he found that a small, nameless group of mainly young people led by a man known as Řehoř had formed a brotherhood whose aim was dear to Chelčický, namely to “search for true Christianity.”²⁶ Ironically, Řehoř was the nephew of the moderate, conciliatory archbishop of Prague, Jan Rokycana, and it was Rokycana who actually suggested that the group seek the guidance of the aged Chelčický. They did so with such enthusiasm as to dismay the archbishop!

The group under Řehoř over time evolved into the *Unitas Fratrum* (Czech Brethren). In 1495 a division took place in which a majority of members led by university-trained scholars in this brotherhood decided to abandon strict separatism and distinctive anti-Catholic doctrines, and so became the Moravian Church.²⁷ In seeking reconciliation with mainstream Protestant Christianity, they deliberately abandoned the radical, pacifist reform theology of Chelčický. He was stigmatized as “intransigent and revengeful.” More seriously, it was alleged that in 1441 — seventeen years before his death and fifty-six years before this posthumous charge was made — Chelčický recanted to avoid the stake. No evidence whatsoever for this calumny has ever been forthcoming.

After 1495, the rump of Czech Brethren, along with their kindred spirits elsewhere in Europe, pass into the general history of the Radical Reformation. Quite soon, Chelčický himself was forgotten except in his homeland. But among the widely dispersed groups of Brethren from the shores of the Atlantic to the steppes of the Ukraine were those who remained loyal to Petr Chelčický’s vision of the restoration of a biblical apostolic faith.

VII. THE STRANGE MODERN HISTORY OF CHELČICKÝ’S MEMORY

Why did the secular socialist government in Czechoslovakia put up a statue to the memory of this despised religious crusader, dead for half a millennium, and clutching his beloved Bible?

Chelčický wrote some very straightforward things about the feudal social order of his day, and especially about the clergy:

²⁶ Joseph Müller and František Bartoš, *Geschichte der Böhmischen Brüder*, Herrnhut, 1922.

²⁷ The Moravian Church, evangelical and missionary in spirit but non-separatist and mainstream in doctrine and outlook, is still active today, especially in northern England, the Carolinas, and the Caribbean.

hirelings, to whom the Whore who sits on the Roman throne has given birth, freely and without pain, sitting on silken cushions, and whose lives she has established in soft effeminacy. And they do all of this with the blood of the common working people, from whom they get these things with the lies they think up . . .²⁸

And he refers to the monks, friars and priests as: “indolent good-for-nothings who lie prostrate on the backs of the working people, deserving nothing, but freely feeding themselves like drones among the bees.”²⁹

Czech Marxists considered Chelčický to be the first to criticize feudalism, champion the common working people of the country, and propound the ideal of a classless society. The renowned philosopher Tomáš Masaryk, who was elected the first President of Czechoslovakia in 1918, had published a work on Chelčický in 1886. So it was that in 1945 the socialists in Czechoslovakia took Petr Chelčický for their hero, and erected the statue.

But then, somehow, it was realized that Chelčický’s ideal of a classless society was based on *Christian* principles, and referred to the ecclesia of God, not to the whole of society or an entire country. And he would never have urged that such a “godly fellowship” be established by violent revolution. It was recalled by his twentieth-century communist admirers that when some of his Czech neighbors had formed the commonwealth of Tábor, pledged to establishing the Kingdom of God on earth by force of arms, and thus preparing the way for Jesus’ return in glory, Chelčický had condemned their militant and revolutionary spirit.

So when Klement Gottwald came to power in 1948, in order to legitimize his oppressive Stalinist regime, he promoted the Tábor revolutionaries as the heroes, and Petr Chelčický was officially relegated to the status of a counter-revolutionary.³⁰

Despite official opprobrium, Marxist scholars studied Chelčický seriously during the forty years of communism in the Czech Republic. František Bartoš was unique in that his first published paper on Petr Chelčický appeared in 1914 and his last in 1965. Others were Radim Foustka, Amedeo Molnár, Alois Míka, Milan Opočenský and Noemi Rejchrtová.³¹

²⁸ *O trojiem lidu řeč. Petru*, 126/778, 128/831.

²⁹ Cited in Eyre, 1988, 253.

³⁰ Eyre, 1988, 254.

³¹ Murray Wagner has an extensive bibliography of Czech language sources.

In the philosophical turmoil of the post-communist era, the status of Petr Chelčický remains uncertain. It is unlikely that his antipathy to materialism will appeal to the advocates of “success theology” in the new free Europe. It is much more likely that, as in Poland, with the revival of Catholicism and traditionalism, interest in the heritage of dissent and in particular of the Bible-centered Brethren groups will wane again, and perhaps even be eclipsed.

But not to the God of heaven. Petr Chelčický was like those described by the apostle Peter:

Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory.³²

³² 1 Peter 5:2-4.