

## JOHN HUSS

Adapted from *John Huss* by Rev. Erasmus Middleton 1816.<sup>1</sup>

John Huss, or Hus, whose name in the Bohemian language means Goose, was born at Hussenitz, a village in Bohemia. His parents were not well off; but they gave him a good education, from which he benefited by working hard. He studied at the university of Prague, to become a priest since this would be a way of escaping poverty. It was at this time that the teachings of Wycliffe, becoming known in Bohemia through links with England via Anne of Bohemia, were banned by the authorities and burnt. Huss read Wycliffe's works and distinguished himself in the university, where he taught grammar and philosophy. Now he had a real devotion to his calling not just a desire to better himself. He had applied himself to the study of the holy scriptures, and the Latin fathers. He became an excellent preacher, and was made chaplain in the church of the Holy Innocents, called Bethlehem, at Prague. He was held in great estimation for his exemplary life and behaviour as a chaplain. By the time the archbishop published two orders against Wycliffe's teaching, Huss had become an important figure at the University.



Huss persuaded many members of the university, that the first of these orders made by the archbishop, was against the privileges and liberties of the university, whose members had a right to read all sorts of books, without any restriction. He also pointed out that the second order contained a serious error in seeming to affirm that there was nothing but the body and blood of Christ in the communion bread and wine. The university appealed to the pope. The pope upheld their appeal and called the archbishop to Rome. The Archbishop explained that the problem was the spread of Wycliffe's teachings in Bohemia where they were beginning to take root. The pope at once commissioned the Archbishop to prevent the publication of Wycliffe's teachings in his province.

This archbishop, it is said, was a most illiterate man. He was so illiterate, that he was called, in ridicule, Alphabetarius, the A B C doctor. He set to work to condemn those university doctors who had not surrendered their copies of Wycliffe's works, prohibiting them to preach. Huss again appealed to the pope who called him to Rome to answer accusations of preaching heresy.

Huss was unwilling to go to Rome for he knew it would be dangerous. King Wenceslaus, the queen, the nobility, and the university, asked the pope to drop the requirement and that if he was dissatisfied with anything being taught in the churches of Bohemia he could send legates to examine the case and the Bohemians would bear the expense. The pope excommunicated Huss, and all his friends or followers. Huss was expelled from the Bethlehem church. He went home to Hussenitz but he did not stop preaching and writing. He wrote many letters, and various treatises defending Wycliffe's ideas and the teachings of Wycliffe continued to spread in Bohemia.

The Archbishop became angry. King Wenceslaus refused to help him against Huss so he asked Sigismund, king of Hungary, who promised to come into Bohemia, and settle the affairs of the church in that kingdom. But the archbishop died in Hungary, before Sigismund began his journey into Bohemia. Another archbishop was appointed who permitted the Hussites to continue their sermons; and their doctrine became almost general in Bohemia.

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<sup>1</sup> Available in full here: <http://www.tracts.ukgo.com>

Doctor Huss left his retirement, and returned to Prague, in 1412. At that time the pope published bulls against Laodislaus, king of Naples, ordering a crusade against him, and granted indulgences to all those who undertook this war. Huss preached against crusades and indulgences. The Bohemian people, inspired by his oratory, declared that pope John was the Antichrist. The magistrates had some of them arrested, and the rest took up arms to set them at liberty; but they were pacified by the magistrates, who gave them solemn assurances that no harm should come to the prisoners. However, once in the judgment hall the prisoners were beheaded. The blood which ran out from the place of execution betrayed this evil deed to the common people, who took arms again, forcibly carried off the bodies of those that were executed and interred them in the church of Bethlehem, honouring them as martyrs.

Concerned by all this disorder, Huss restrained the people from further violence. He was now so popular that they did what he asked and he continued to set out Biblical teaching in reply to the accusations of those who condemned Wycliffe's teachings.

Huss eventually travelled to Constance to answer his accusers before the Council of Constance and was given a safe conduct to the city by the emperor. But, notwithstanding the safe conduct, he was no sooner within the pope's jurisdiction, than he was arrested, and committed as a prisoner to a chamber in the palace.

The nobility of Bohemia and Poland presented a petition to the emperor and council, asking that Huss might be set at liberty, as he had been seized and imprisoned contrary to the safe conduct of his imperial majesty. The Bohemians presented a writing to the council, wherein they maintained, that the propositions, which the enemies of Huss had drawn out of his books, were mutilated, and falsified, on purpose to put him to death. They begged the council to set him at liberty, that he might be heard for himself, and offered to give a bond for his appearance. The patriarch of Antioch answered, in the name of the council, that they could not set Huss at liberty; but would send for him, and give him a favourable hearing. The lords of Bohemia then addressed the emperor, who had sent him there to defend that kingdom from a charge of heresy, and was now one of his persecutors but it was all to no avail.

The fourteenth session of the Council resolved, that, before they sent for doctor Huss, the articles drawn out of his books should be examined, and condemned, even without hearing what he had to say himself. This was so strongly opposed by the nobles of Bohemia, that the emperor told the council, they must hear Huss, before they condemned him; upon which they sent for him, ordered him to acknowledge his books, and read the first articles of his accusation. These were about thirty, drawn from the writings of Wickliffe, and some of them he freely admitted; such as, that there was one, only, universal church, which is a collection of all God's chosen people. That the condemnation of the forty-five articles of Wickliffe was irrational and unjust, he said. A great many other false and silly objections were raised against him, which he refuted with dignified eloquence, and recommending himself, and his cause to God, he was carried off.

He was no sooner gone, than the emperor, whose subject he was, rose, and told the assembly that, in his opinion if Huss did not abjure, he ought to be burnt and that all his followers, especially Jerom of Prague, should be exemplarily punished.

The next day, Huss was brought again before the assembly, where eighty-nine articles were read to him, which were said to be drawn out of his books, and he was advised to abjure them all. But he replied, that many of the articles were ones which he had never taught, and he was ready to explain his opinion regarding the others. After many disputes, he was sent back to prison; and a resolution was then taken to burn him as a heretic, if he would not retract.

The emperor, on the tenth of June, sent four bishops, and two lords, to the prison, to prevail on Huss to make a recantation. But with tears in his eyes, Huss said that he was not conscious of having preached, or written any thing against the truth of God, or the faith of his true church. The deputies then told him of the great wisdom and authority of the council. "Let them, said Huss, "send the meanest person that can convince me, by arguments, from the word of God, and I will submit my judgment to him." This was not the answer the deputies wanted and Huss remained in prison under sentence of death.

While Huss was in prison, he wrote letters to encourage his countrymen to persevere in the doctrines he had taught; and expressed his own firm resolution of never departing from them while he had life.

On the seventh of July, was conducted to the place where the fifteenth session of the council was held. He was required to abjure, which he refused. The council, therefore ordained, "That he should be degraded from the priesthood, his books publicly burnt, and himself delivered to the secular power."

Doctor Huss heard this sentence calmly. He kneeled down and prayed for his persecutors. They then stripped him of his vestments, put a mitre of paper on his head on which devils were painted, with this inscription, in large letters, 'A RING-LEADER OF HERETICS.' Huss smiled. "It is less painful than a crown of thorns," he said.

The bishops delivered Huss to the emperor, who put him into the hands of the duke of Bavaria. His books were burnt at the gate of the church, and he was led to the suburbs to be burnt. Huss died a martyr's death. After the flames had subsided his ashes were thrown into the River Rhine.

Huss's name means "goose" in his native language. Before his execution some say he said, "you may kill a weak goose but more powerful birds, eagles and falcons, will come after me". This statement impressed the later reformer Martin Luther whose emblem was a swan. "They might have roasted a goose but in a hundred years a swan would have sung to whom they would have been forced to listen," he said.



The picture above is the oldest one we have of Huss and shows his execution. It is found in the Martinická Bible of 1430 now housed in the Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.