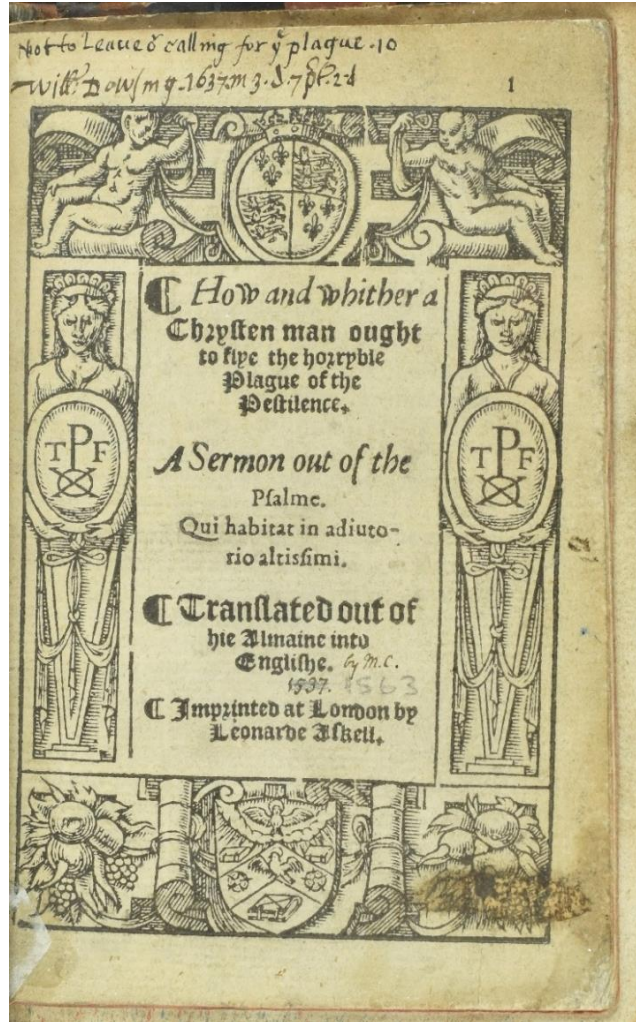


William Dowsing Reads a Plague Sermon

In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, someone considering the various early modern religious tracts which make up New College Library, Oxford, BT1.133.15 is likely to have their attention caught by a work entitled *How and whither a Chrysten man ought to flye the horryble plague of the pestilence* (London, 1563).



Andreas Osiander, *How and whither a Chrysten man ought to flye the horryble plague of the pestilence*
trans. by Miles Coverdale (London, 1563)
New College Library, Oxford, BT1.133.15(2), title page

The work, which was first printed in 1537, is an anonymous translation by Miles Coverdale (1488–1568/9) of a sermon by the Lutheran theologian Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), which was first printed in 1533 under the title *Wie und wohin ein Christ vor der Plage der Pestilenz fliehen soll*. The sermon, which takes Psalm 91 as its text, was written in connection with an outbreak of plague which occurred in Nuremberg in 1533. There were many within the city who believed that the best way to fight to plague was for people, especially women and children, to flee the city and to wait for the outbreak to pass. But others, including Osiander, were troubled by the unchristian way in which this response neglected the needs of those who were unable to leave so readily and by the way in which this uncharitable exodus seemed to value bodily over spiritual health.¹

¹ Andrew Weeks, *Paracelsus: Speculative Theory and the Crisis of the Early Reformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 53. On the 1533 Nuremberg plague more generally, see Hannah Murphy, *A New Order of Medicine: The*

The argument of the sermon is that although plagues may stem from a variety of ‘naturall causes’ (A4v), such as ‘out of the influence of the starres, out of the workynge of the Cometes, out of the vnseasonable wether and altiryng of the ayre, oute of the Southe wyndes, oute of stinking waters, or out of foule mistes of the grou[n]d’ (A3v), these diverse causes were themselves ‘sent and sterred vp out of Gods wrath for our synne and vnthankfulnesse’ (A4v). Consequently, to flee the plague does nothing to address its root cause and may, if the motives are selfish or if the act involves the neglect of Christian duties, make matters worse: ‘And out of all this may your charitye well perceauē, howe vnwysely and vnchristenlye they doe, that oute of inordinate feare, of this plague leaue theyr calling and office, maliciously withdrawing the loue: helpe, and faithfulnesse, which they (out of Gods commaundement) are bounde to shewe vnto their neighbours, and so do sinne greuously against the co[m]maundement of God’ (A5v). Osiander is careful to avoid suggesting that all those ‘whiche die of this plage’ are ‘vnchristen and faithlesse’ (C4v), but he does argue that true Christians should have nothing to fear in dying from a plague which has been brought about by other people’s sinful actions. His conclusion is simple: rather than fleeing from the pestilence itself, we should instead flee ‘in good earneste (by true repentaunce and amendment) from synne wherewith the worlde hath deserued this horrible plague’ (C6r–v).

There are various elements of this which modern readers are likely to find unconvincing, but the behaviour which Osiander encourages has much in common with what people are told to do in epidemics today. However, whereas Osiander based his argument on the idea that apparently healthy people can exacerbate an outbreak through the invisible property of sinfulness, modern epidemiological advice is based on the understanding that apparently healthy people can be the carriers of pathogens which are invisible to the naked eye. As a result, modern epidemiologists may echo Osiander in requesting that people stay put when an epidemic becomes a substantive possibility, and Osiander may, without understanding the causation involved, have been giving good advice in his sermon.

This particular copy of Osiander’s sermon is significant because it once belonged to the puritan William Dowsing (1596–1668). Dowsing is largely known to history on account of the major campaign of iconoclasm which he conducted in East Anglia during the English Civil War.² In December 1643 he was appointed commissioner for the destruction of ‘monuments of idolatry and superstition’ by Edward Montagu (1602–1671), second Earl of Manchester, in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the Eastern Association. During the next eight months, Dowsing visited around 250 churches in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk and oversaw the destruction of fixtures—including decorative carvings, memorial brasses, and stained-glass windows—which he found to contain idolatrous imagery. Because of the widespread damage which he caused and a detailed journal which he kept of his activities, this aspect of Dowsing’s life has loomed large in the work of modern historians. It is, however, gradually coming to be recognised that Dowsing was also an energetic reader and annotator of books.³ It is apparent that, although his income was fairly

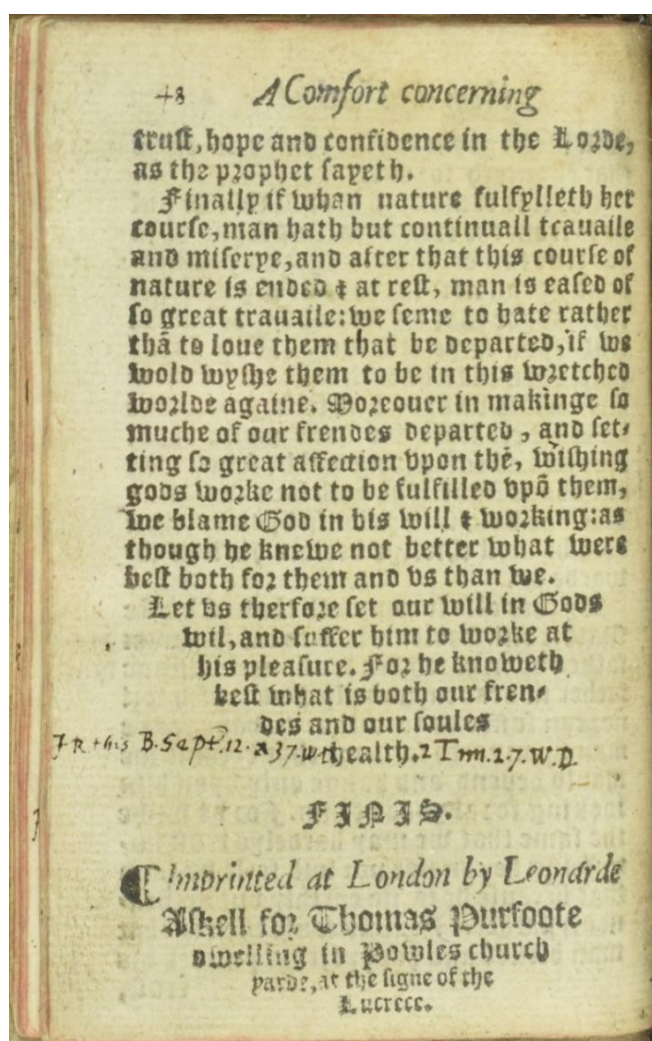
Rise of Physicians in Reformation Nuremberg (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), pp. 45–67. For a discussion of Osiander’s sermon alongside five other religious discussions of whether or not to flee the plague—works by Theodore Beza, Henry Holland, John Hooper, Martin Luther, and Thomas White—see, Spencer J. Weinreich, ‘How (Not) to Survive a Plague: The Theology of Fleeing Disease in Sixteenth-Century England’, *Social History of Medicine*, 33 (2) (2020), 355–76.

² For the definitive account of Dowsing’s iconoclastic activities, see *The Journal of William Dowsing: Iconoclasm in East Anglia during the English Civil War*, ed. by Trevor Cooper (Woodbridge: Boydell Press in association with the Ecclesiological Society, 2001).

³ For previous discussions of Dowsing’s activities as a reader, see Cecil Deedes, ‘A Portraiture of William Dowsing, the Parliamentary Visitor, 1643/4’, *East Anglian: or, Notes and Queries on Subjects Connected with the Counties of Suffolk, Cambridge, Essex and Norfolk*, 7 (1898), 17–19; Cecil Deedes, ‘Further Portraiture of William Dowsing (Parliamentary Visitor) as a Student’, *East Anglian: or, Notes and Queries on Subjects Connected with the Counties of Suffolk, Cambridge, Essex and Norfolk*, 11 (1906), 33–35; John Morrill, ‘William Dowsing and the Administration of Iconoclasm in the Puritan Revolution’, in *The Journal of William Dowsing*, pp. 1–28 (esp. pp. 5–10); Dunstan Roberts, ‘Additions to the Library of William Dowsing (1596–1668): A Reformation Tract Volume Reassembled’, *The Electronic British Library Journal* (2013), article 10, 1–10.

modest,⁴ Dowsing succeeded in amassing a collection of several hundred books—and a picture is slowly emerging of someone who not only read books very thoroughly but for whom reading was a constituent part of godliness.

The marks which Dowsing made in this copy of Osiander's sermon are largely representative of those which he made in other books. On the title page, he has written his name. After this, he has made a concise note of the date on which he bought the book and the price which he paid for it. The note here ('1637.m.3.d.7 p[re]t[ium] 2d') tells us that he bought it on 7 May 1637 and that he paid two pence for it.⁵ At the other end of the work, he has written a corresponding note, which comes in two parts. The first is a note of when he read the book, followed by his initials ('I R[e]ad this B[ook] Sept[ember] .12. a 37. WD') and the second consists of a scriptural citation followed by his initials ('2 Tim.2.7.W.D.').



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.133.15(2), sig. C8v

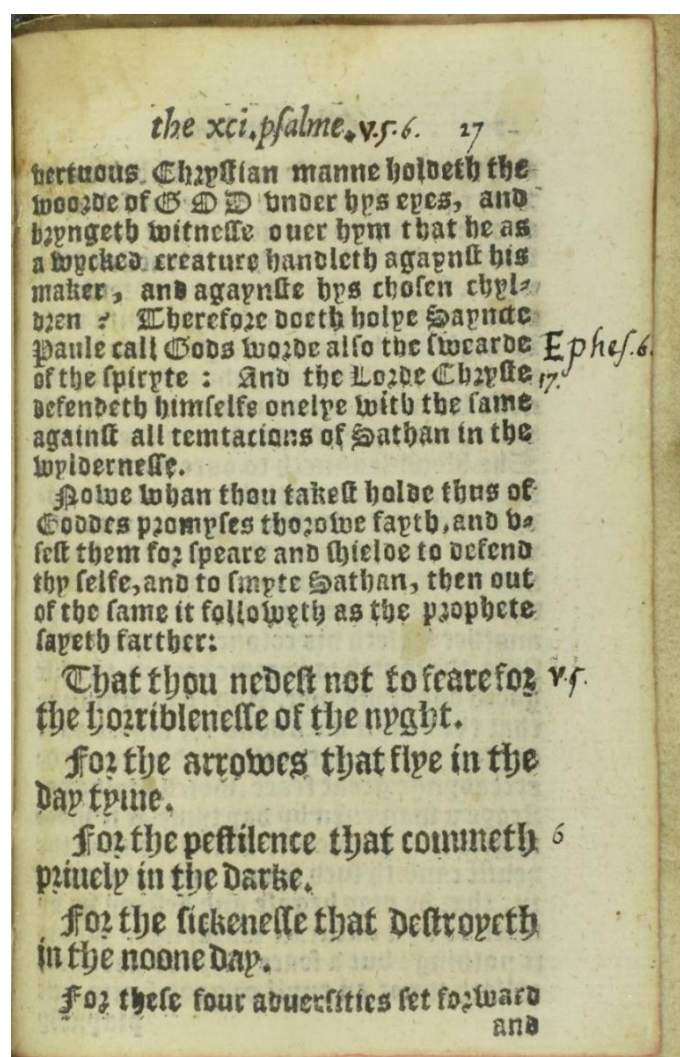
The note of when he read the book can be used in conjunction with the note of when he bought it to calculate the lag-time between purchase and reading, which was just over four months. This is in keeping with the evidence available in other books in which Dowsing included both

⁴ On the subject of Dowsing's income, John Morrill notes that although 'his letter of appointment as the Earl of Manchester's visitor describes him as a gentleman, he looks much more like a typical yeoman'. Morrill estimates that by the end of his life, Dowsing's income was somewhere in the region of £50–80 per annum. See Morrill, 'William Dowsing and the Administration of Iconoclasm in the Puritan Revolution', p. 3.

⁵ At the time Dowsing was writing, March was the first month of the year.

dates, which indicates that he often read his books within a few weeks of purchase and almost always within a year. This suggests that Dowsing, whether through his relatively modest means or through an aversion to intellectual vanity, was good at limiting his book-buying to what he could find the time to read. As for the scriptural citation, Dowsing has chosen 2 Timothy 2:7, which is ‘Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things’.⁶ This verse, which has obvious relevance to the activity of reading, was the one which he most often used to mark his completion of a book. On some occasions, though, he used other verses. For example, in his copy John Bale’s *The Actes or unchaste examples of the Englyshe votaryes* (London, 1560), in addition to 2 Timothy 2:7, he has cited Hebrews 13:4 (‘Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge’), a verse which is particularly apposite to Bale’s attack on England’s religious houses.⁷

Within the body of the work, Dowsing’s annotations are relatively light. Most of them relate to the citation of the Bible. Sometimes, when a verse is quoted or evoked, but not explicitly cited, Dowsing adds the relevant citation. For example, where the text says ‘Therefore doeth holye Sayncte Paule call Gods worde also the swerde of the spiryte’ (B6r), Dowsing has noted in the margin that this is an allusion to Ephesians 6:17 (‘And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’).



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.133.15(2), sig. B6r

⁶ All biblical quotations in this article are from the King James (or Authorised) Version.

⁷ St Catharine’s College, Cambridge, D.11.62, part two, sig. U4v.

In other cases, he adds verses to citations which give only the book and the chapter. Since Coverdale made his translation of this sermon before the Geneva Bible (1557–1560) introduced a standardised system of verse numbering, all of the printed citations in this book fall into this category.⁸ Consequently, Dowsing found plenty of citations which were in need of expansion. This is particularly apparent in the book's running title, which reads 'A Sermon vpon the xci Psalme'. For Dowsing, the number of the psalm was not enough; in many cases, he has added the verse or verses which are being discussed on particular openings. The extent of these additions and of the similar ones which he made in other books suggests that he knew large swathes of the Bible by heart. It is likely, moreover, that in systematically deploying his biblical knowledge Dowsing felt that he was reading in a distinctively godly fashion.

Another addition which Dowsing made to the book was to add his own pagination. This was because the book was not printed with any pagination of its own. This may seem like an exercise in arbitrary perfectionism, but it was probably intended to fulfil a practical purpose. Dowsing often used annotations to establish connections between the various books which he owned, and it is likely that he added page numbers to this book in order to give himself the means of referring to it in the margins of his other books. Although no references to this sermon have yet been found in Dowsing's other books, it is quite plausible that they will surface in the future. The sermon is also relatively unusual amongst the books which Dowsing owned because it does not contain any references to other works, except for the Bible. This makes it something of an outlier within Dowsing's collection as a whole. But the additions which it does contain—the biblical references, the pagination, and the inscriptions—still indicate that it was once part of a large and intricate network. Indeed, the books which Dowsing owned were not simply an assemblage but a carefully integrated whole, a collection bound together by common themes, intertextual references, and practices of notation.

The scale of Dowsing's activities as a reader has only slowly become apparent to modern scholars.⁹ No catalogue of Dowsing's books is known to survive, and, although he bequeathed most of his books to his son, Samuel (d. 1703), the collection was dispersed soon after his death in the early eighteenth century.¹⁰ As a result, surviving books from Dowsing's collection are spread across a large number of modern-day repositories and collections, but they are gradually coming to be recognised through the efforts of scholars, booksellers, and librarians. To date, 48 of his books have been discovered—plus a collection of 158 sermons in 6 volumes. From the intertextual references in these books, it can be inferred that Dowsing owned at least a further 164 items. It is apparent from the evidence which has so far emerged that Dowsing was reading until at least the age of 70.¹¹

As one might expect, many of Dowsing's books were recent works of practical divinity.¹² These include works by Richard Rogers,¹³ Jeremiah Burroughs, and Andrew Willet.¹⁴ He also owned a significant number of religious works from the previous century, including some which

⁸ On the verse numbers which the Geneva Bible introduced, see David Daniell, *Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 289, 296, 301; Dunstan Roberts, 'Readers' Annotations in Sixteenth-Century Religious Books', unpublished doctoral thesis (University of Cambridge, 2012), pp. 99–100.

⁹ The figures in this paragraph are derived from the author's unpublished research.

¹⁰ See Trevor Cooper, 'The History and Nature of the Journal', in *The Journal of William Dowsing*, pp. 138–47 (pp. 140–1); Roberts, 'Additions to the Library of William Dowsing (1596–1668)', pp. 2, 10.

¹¹ This is demonstrated by an inscription in his copy of John Fit John's [*sic*] *A Diamonde most Precious* (London, 1577), which contains a note which indicates that he read it (for the second time in August 1666). See Washington, Folger Shakespeare Library, HH87/3, sig. O2v.

¹² Unless otherwise stated, the information provided in this paragraph is based on the author's unpublished research.

¹³ Richard Rogers, *A Commentary vpon the Whole Booke of Iudges* (London, 1615), Aberystwyth University Library, RBR* BS1305.R7 Qto.

¹⁴ Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Exodum, That is, A Sixfold Commentary vpon the second Booke of Moses called Exodvs* (London, 1633), Vancouver Public Library, 222.1 W71h.

played a defining role in the English Reformation. These include works by William Tyndale,¹⁵ Jean Calvin, John Jewel. In this area, he seems to have been guided by John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, a work which he owned in three different editions and which he cites more than any other work besides the Bible. He also owned numerous works of history, including ones by classical authors, such as Plutarch, Livy, and Suetonius (always in English translations), and by modern ones, such as John Speed, Francis Bacon, and Walter Raleigh.¹⁶ Where Dowsing's copies of these historical works have been located, his annotations suggest that he read them with just as much rigour as books on overtly religious subjects.

The texts which have so far been identified are probably just a fragment of a once much larger collection. Although there may be much which will never be known about it, it is likely that plenty more of his books still await discovery and that the annotations which they contain will enable the known contents of his collection to be expanded even further.

There remain the questions of what Dowsing's books meant to him and what he thought he was doing in reading and annotating them so thoroughly. Partly, it seems that the notes that he wrote, and especially the dates of when he bought and read his books, constituted a form of life-writing or autobiography, which he chose to disperse across many volumes. Read in this way, the notes present a narrative in which Dowsing bought books at fair prices and on serious subjects and proceeded to read them in a diligent and godly fashion. This idea has parallels with recent scholarship on the keeping of financial accounts (and especially those recording personal expenditure) in the early modern period, which suggests that these records were as much about presenting the appearance of spiritual cleanliness as they were about charting expenditure.¹⁷ In the same way, Dowsing may have been demonstrating to himself or to a divine auditor that he had spent his time well. This consideration has implications for the often discussed and highly influential idea that early modern readers read books 'for action', rather than for other, more general or recreational purposes. Dowsing would, particularly during his campaign of iconoclasm in the 1640s, have had no shortage of opportunities for deploying his book-learning in support of his political aims, but the fact that he continued his energetic programme of reading into old age should make us wonder whether his actions were as end-driven as all that, at least as far as this world was concerned. For godly readers such as Dowsing, the real objective may have lain in the life to come.

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¹⁵ William Tyndale, *The Supper of the Lorde* ([London], 1547?), The British Library, C.115.n.73(2); William Tyndale, *The Obedience of Christen Man* ([London], 1548?), Cambridge University Library, Syn.8.54.172.

¹⁶ Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World*, Virginia, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, D57 .R16 1617 folio.

¹⁷ See, for example, Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3–4, 9–10, 57–122; Jason Scott-Warren, *Shakespeare's First Reader: The Paper Trails of Richard Stonley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), pp. 49–73.