

## **The 1516 Genoa Psalter<sup>1</sup> by Eric James Keller**

With its heavy pages and intricate style, the 1516 Genoa Psalter is awe inspiring to behold. Financed by wealthy Genoese statesman Agostino Giustiniani and published by Petrus Paulus Porro, the immense undertaking of printing the Psalms in multiple languages was completed. Fully titled *The Psalter in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Aramaic*, this book of psalms is the first of its kind. Comprising eight columns of beautifully legible printing, spanning five languages and providing scholarly notes on the psalms in Latin, this rendition of *The Psalter* is notable for more than just being a book in multiple languages. *The Psalter in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Aramaic* is a grand work of accomplished scholarship and should be renowned as such, even if it was not a financial success upon release<sup>2</sup>.

### **Columbus and Psalm Nineteen**

Within any psalter one will be able to find Psalm Nineteen. However, Psalm Nineteen of the Genoa Psalter is exceptional. From the notes of the Psalter, the psalm in question provides the earliest known biographical information of Christopher Columbus, seen by the editor as having fulfilled a biblical prophecy<sup>3</sup>. The Psalter also contains the first recorded information of Columbus' second voyage. However, Columbus' son, Ferdinand, complained about this interpretation of his father's life to the Genoese Senate. The Senate promptly ordered the two

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<sup>1</sup> All translation work herein has been performed by the writer, Eric Keller.

<sup>2</sup> "Genoa Quadruplex Psalter," Chetham's Library, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://library.chethams.com/collections/101-treasures-of-chethams/genoa-quadruplex-psalter/>

<sup>3</sup> Agostino Giustiniani, *The Psalter in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and Aramaic* (Genoa: Petrus Paulus Porro, 1516)

thousand copies of the book destroyed<sup>4</sup>. Despite this order of decimation, copies have managed to survive to present day.

### Whose Line Is It Anyway?

A targeted translation of the Genoa Psalter's Arabic reveals even more about this Psalter's contribution to the world as a scholarly work. Agostino Giustiniani was not only a bishop, but a linguist who studied the languages presented in the Genoa Psalter<sup>5</sup>. His knowledge of Arabic is pronounced and commendable. There is, however, a perceivable weakness of his text, the apparent inability of the typesetter to fully comprehend Arabic lettering.

The dahl (ﺀ) is mistyped as the medial form<sup>6</sup> of ha (ح). The tau (ط) is mistakenly replaced with a kaf (ك), and the fe (ف) seems to have been mistaken for a medial ayn (ع). This leads to situations where the word ينطق appears to be يتكق which means “to be clogged” instead of the intended “to utter.” Additionally, in the next line فالك, a noun, looks like علط, a verb. However, once corrected, the Arabic is spelled properly and translates coherently.

Despite this shortcoming, Giustiniani's word choice is exemplary, and the weight behind the meaning of the words is present. Whereas it is possible to use many words to write in a language, Giustiniani frequently uses complex constructions and elevated language to give his subject the glory he feels it is worthy of. For example, in line one of table one<sup>7</sup>, the verb نطق is

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<sup>4</sup> St. John's College, University of Cambridge “Polyglot Psalter (Genoa: Petrus Paulus Porro, 1516)” Accessed February 21, 2020.

[https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/special\\_collections/early\\_books/psalter.html](https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/special_collections/early_books/psalter.html)

<sup>5</sup> “Genoa Quadruplex Psalter”, Chetham's Library

<sup>6</sup> Arabic lettering has different forms based on its position in the word. These are the initial, medial, final, and stand-alone forms. Out of context several of these can look extremely similar which is a possibility as to why the typesetter made these errors.

<sup>7</sup> See Table 1 in Appendix

used. This word means “to pronounce/vocalize/utter” and fits perfectly, yet the verb *علن* (to announce) or even *حكى* (to tell or narrate) could have been used in its stead. The key to verb choice here is the subject, the heavens, needing to perform an action and is followed by manifestations of speech and knowledge during the day and night. As such the first verbs meaning of vocalization is the most apt. Word choice and eloquence are two of the most difficult problems that face a writer, and Giustiniani should be applauded for his attention to detail in navigating this conundrum, especially in a language different than his native tongue.

Additionally, the translation of lines one through four of the Arabic in Psalm nineteen is faithful to modern interpretations of the Psalms, reading “The Heavens pronounce the glory of God. The Skies reveal his handiwork. Day manifests speech and Night manifests knowledge. There is no speech nor language where you do not hear their voices.<sup>8</sup>” This matches quite well with the King James Version of Psalm Nineteen which states “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.<sup>9</sup>” As such, it is clear that Giustiniani worked faithfully to translate the Psalms into multiple languages. The errors in the Arabic are not his, but his typesetter’s.

### **An Unsuccessful Success of History**

Unfortunately, despite the eloquence of Giustiniani’s writing, the Genoa Psalter itself is not without flaw. After all, the work was neither a financial success nor did its typesetters understand what they were doing during printing. Regardless of these flaws, it is a very real success in history. The Genoa Psalter was the first polyglot psalter published, and it contains the

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<sup>8</sup> Giustiniani, *The Psalter*.

<sup>9</sup> Ps 19:1-4 KJV.

first known account of Christopher Columbus' second voyage. Additionally, The Genoa Psalter contains in-depth scholarly notes on every page, allowing insight into classical thought on the psalms. Giustiniani should have been praised for his efforts, yet he was not rewarded by the people of Europe in the early sixteenth century and he abandoned his plan to make a polyglot version of the New Testament. Despite this, *The Psalter in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Aramaic* of Agostino Giustiniani will go down in the annals of history as a great achievement.

## Appendix

Table 1.

Translation of the first several lines of Psalm 19 from Arabic to English as written by Giustiniani in The Psalter in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, and Aramaic.

Line	English Translation	Arabic of Psalm Nineteen
1	The heavens pronounce the Glory of God	السموات تنطق بمجد الله
2	The skies reveal his handiwork	والفلك يخبر بعمل يديه
3	Day manifests speech	يوم يبدي كلامه ليوم
4	And night manifests knowledge	وليل يبدي علم لليل
5	There is no speech nor language	ليس بقول ولا بكلمات
6	Where you do not hear their voices	الذين لا تسمع اصواتهم

## Bibliography

Agostino Giustiniani, *The Psalter in Hebrew, Greek, Arabic and Aramaic*. Genoa: Petrus Paulus Porro, 1516.

"Genoa Quadruplex Psalter." Chetham's Library. Accessed March 22, 2021.

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