THE PROPHET
THE SPIRITUAL CLASSIC

THE PROPHET

THE SPIRITUAL CLASSIC

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

KAHLIL GIBRAN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

THE PROPHET

Also available in the same series:

Beyond Good and Evil: The Philosophy Classic
by Friedrich Nietzsche (ISBN: 978-0-857-08848-2)

Meditations: The Philosophy Classic
by Marcus Aurelius (ISBN 978-0-857-08846-8)

On the Origin of Species: The Science Classic
by Charles Darwin (ISBN: 978-0-857-08847-5)

Tao Te Ching: The Ancient Classic
by Lao Tzu (ISBN: 978-0-857-08311-1)

The Art of War: The Ancient Classic
by Sun Tzu (ISBN: 978-0-857-08009-7)

The Game of Life and How to Play It: The Self-Help Classic
by Florence Scovel Shinn (ISBN: 978-0-857-08840-6)

The Interpretation of Dreams: The Psychology Classic
by Sigmund Freud (ISBN: 978-0-857-08844-4)

The Prince: The Original Classic
by Niccolo Machiavelli (ISBN: 978-0-857-08078-3)

The Republic: The Influential Classic
by Plato (ISBN: 978-0-857-08313-5)

The Science of Getting Rich: The Original Classic
by Wallace Wattles (ISBN: 978-0-857-08008-0)

The Wealth of Nations: The Economics Classic
by Adam Smith (ISBN: 978-0-857-08077-6)

Think and Grow Rich: The Original Classic
by Napoleon Hill (ISBN: 978-1-906-46559-9)

THE PROPHET

The Spiritual Classic

KAHLIL GIBRAN

With an Introduction by
TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

This edition first published 2020

The material for *The Prophet* is based on the 1923 edition, published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, and is now in the public domain. This edition is not sponsored or endorsed by, or otherwise affiliated with Kahlil Gibran, their families or heirs.

Registered office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978–0–857–08855-0 (hardback) ISBN 978–0–857–08852-9 (ebk)
ISBN 978–0–857–08839-0 (ebk)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design: Wiley

Set in 12/16pt ITC New Baskerville by Aptara, New Delhi, India
Printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall, UK

CONTENTS

AN INTRODUCTION

BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

Along with the Bible and Shakespeare, *The Prophet* is one of those timeless pieces of literature that you have probably heard in a wedding speech or funeral eulogy. There is nothing quite like it, and it holds a special place in millions of people's hearts. It has sold ten million copies in English, and at least double that across 100 translations.

Despite the book's fame, not many people know much about the man behind it, Kahlil Gibran.

WHO WAS KAHLIL GIBRAN?

Given that the title of *The Prophet* is suggestive of Muhammad, we presume that Kahlil Gibran lived in the Islamic world. He was in fact born in Lebanon, but his heritage was Maronite Christian, and he would spend much of his life in the United States.

His deep knowledge of Arabic literature, his understanding of the spiritual yearnings of life in the West, and his skill as a poet and artist, arguably made him the perfect person to create *The Prophet*. Yet the book only came together at a mature point in his career as a writer and artist. He had already had eleven books published (eight in Arabic and

three in English), and was considered an important figure in attempts to revive Arabic literature.

Born in Lebanon in 1883, Gibran carried with him the religious and political conflicts of his home country. Only a couple of decades before he was born, for instance, thousands of Christians had been slaughtered in Lebanon. He wrote tracts calling for the country's various sects to come together to fight oppressive Turkish Ottoman rule over Lebanon and Syria, and organized a relief committee to fight famine in the Middle East during the years of World War One. But politics was never a passion. He was more concerned to build bridges between the world's religions, and across East and West. He was first and foremost a poet, and from an early age was seen as 'wise'.

His background was inauspicious. Kahlil's father owned some land around the village of Bsharri in Lebanon, but he wasn't a hard worker and preferred to gamble and drink. While working as a tax collector, Gibran Snr embezzled money and was found out. The family faced financial ruin, and Gibran's mother Kamila decided that her four children, including sons Bhutros and Kahlil, and daughters Marianna and Sultana, would be better off in the United States (without her husband).

By 1895 the Gibrans were living in Boston's impoverished South End with thousands of other poor immigrants. Kahlil, then twelve, attended school for the first time. He enrolled in art classes run by the photographer and publisher Fred Holland Day, who introduced him to Western literature. Three years later, he was sent back to Lebanon to finish his schooling.

On his return, at nineteen, Kahlil might have felt excitement at returning to America, and the possibilities before him. But two weeks before he arrived, his sister Sultana died of tuberculosis. Bhutros would fall victim to TB a year later, and then Kamila to cancer.

Some of the pain was alleviated by a new friendship. Mary Haskell was a radical headmistress with an interest in orphans and she supported Gibran's career. She encouraged him to exhibit his art, and to publish his prose poetry, short stories, and essays in English. It never

turned into the romantic partnership she wished for, but she remained a loyal editor of all his English language works.

Gibran would go on to have several other close friendships with women, some of which turned to romance, but he had the air of a person with a vocation – with all the costs which that brings in terms of attention to others.

Kahlil Gibran, 1913

In 1908 Gibran began a two-year stay in Paris, funded by Mary Haskell. He studied art, read widely, and mixed with intellectuals and artists. In 1912 he moved from Boston to New York where he was able to exhibit his paintings and have works published, including *Al-Ajniha*

Al-Mutakassirah (*The Broken Wings*) and *The Madman*. In 1920 he established a society of Arab writers and continued his writings in Arabic in support of the emancipation from Ottoman rule of Lebanon and Syria.

The divisions between Islam and Christianity, and between East and West, turned Gibran into a fighter against injustice and violence. It drove him to seek out and express what was universal about the human experience.

Although it was not an East–West conflict, Gibran had been overjoyed when World War One came to an end. He felt that the pain of the war had changed humanity. People wanted to make sense of it all, and were hungry for beauty and truth. *The Prophet* grew out of his wish to express a new dawn.

BIRTH OF A PHENOMENON

In writing it, Gibran was heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche's lengthy prose poem, *Thus Spake Zarathustra.* Nietzsche had become the prophet of Western civilization, seeing through the West's material success and exposing its existential crisis. If Christianity was an outdated moral system, and science had taken the place of God, the only thing left was for humans to chart their own destiny. Gibran also despaired at institutional religion (although he did believe in a God) and put his faith in the ultimate wisdom of human beings. Through our suffering, we come to a state of wisdom that empowers us.

Gibran told Mary Haskell that Nietzsche's words could have been his own, except that Nietzsche seemed to be 'writing for humans 300 years ahead', while he, Gibran, was thinking of the human condition '600 years hence'. Nietzsche's thought was taking account of the impact of scientific and social changes of the Europe of his day, while Gibran was focused on the human condition in any time or place.

The book's moving, poetic universality saw it sell out on its first 1923 printing. That was just the beginning. For the next few decades, until it entered the public domain, *The Prophet* became a cash cow

for publisher Alfred A Knopf. It reached two peaks of popularity, during World War Two and in the Sixties, and by 2012 had notched up nine million copies sold in the US alone, with even more in other English-speaking territories. The first foreign translation was in French (not Arabic), and it would come out in 100 more languages.

Steeped as Gibran was in Sufism, the mystical expression of Islam, and his own Maronite Christianity, it is no surprise that Almustafa, the protagonist of *The Prophet*, is a sort of hybrid of Christ and Muhammad. Indeed, part of the success of the book in the West was that, at a time when less was known about religions other than Christianity, it had 'oriental' mystique.

Despite its fame, *The Prophet* has never been a critic's favourite. Sensing resistance, marketing copy for early editions included a quote from the sculptor Auguste Rodin (whom Gibran had met in Paris), claiming him as 'the William Blake of the 20th century'. He was sometimes called the 'Syrian Shelley' (Lebanon was part of Syria when under Ottoman rule), and *The Prophet* itself can indeed be seen as a poetic derivation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra.*

A number of biographies have sought to redress the critical deficit, although some are a little hagiographic. What is clear is that Gibran, although somewhat uncomfortable with being tagged as a prophet himself, and having his fair share of personal faults, still believed it was his destiny to raise up humankind in some way. His writings often frustrated him, as he felt they were not up to this standard. But an artist only needs to create one great work to be remembered, and with *The Prophet*, everything clicked. Gibran felt that it had come closer than anything else to expressing his vision.

As an indicator of the book's enduring appeal, in 2019 a pristine copy of the first Knopf edition, signed by Gibran, was on sale for $29,000. You can buy a first edition copy for a tenth of that, but they tend to be 'well loved' with notes and underlining. This is as it should be. Gibran was not a materialistic person, and *The Prophet* seeks to take us beyond time and space, reminding us what really matters.

TIMELESS THEMES

Let us briefly recount the narrative arc of *The Prophet*, which is structured into twenty-six chapters of prose poetry.

Almustafa lives on the island of Orphalese. Locals consider him something of a sage, but he is from elsewhere, and longs to go back to his homeland.

He has waited twelve years for a ship to take him home. From a hill above the town, he sees the ship coming into the harbour. At this point, he should feel elated. In fact, sadness comes over him at the thought of leaving the people he has come to know.

The elders of the city feel the same way. They ask him not to go, to at least leave some record of his philosophy. He agrees, and begins speaking his truth to the crowds which have gathered. Almustafa speaks at length on all the things that concern human beings: pain and sorrow, giving, eating and drinking, clothes, buying and selling, crime and punishment, laws, teaching, time, pleasure, marriage, religion, death, beauty, and friendship.

Sorrow can hollow out our being, says the prophet, but it makes way for joy to enter in another season of life. 'Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding', he says. Rather than fight it, it is best to marvel at pain as another experience of precious life. Emotional pain is 'the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self'.

Next time you find yourself in a state of sorrow, consider that it may have been self-chosen at some level of your being, to bring about an enlargement of your self. The prophet tells those gathered that the lives we lead on earth represent only a fraction of our larger selves. 'In your longing for your giant self lies your goodness', he says. In pursuit of self-knowledge, therefore, we are looking for the best in ourselves.

Regarding *love*, the prophet says that it is a mistake to seek 'only love's peace and love's pleasure'. This makes us less of a person. Therefore, the prophet says: 'When love beckons to you, follow him/Though his ways are hard and steep.' We cannot direct love's way, 'for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course'.

When questioned about *marriage*, the prophet departs from the cliché that it involves two people becoming one. In the same way that 'the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow', a real marriage gives both people space to develop their individuality. Yet we should be careful of our wish for total freedom, too. When people speak of wanting to be free, often it is aspects of themselves they are trying to get away from.

Almustafa has interesting things to say about *work*, which he says is crucial for involving us in the normal procession of life. People think of work as a curse, but in doing your work 'you fulfil a part of earth's furthest dream, assigned to you when that dream was born'. Through work you express your love for whoever will benefit from it, and satisfy your own need to create.

When it comes to *property*, we should guard against the love of houses and things, because they erode the soul. If you attach yourself too much to the domestic luxuries of life, the prophet says, 'Your house shall not be an anchor but a mast.' You will be tied to it when the ship sinks.

Should we pray? You cannot ask for anything in *prayer*, Almustafa says, because God already knows your deepest needs. Our main, true need is in fact closeness to the divine. Therefore, we should not pray for other things, but ask for more of God in our lives.

This is just a taste of the twenty-six themes, and no replacement for the experience of reading and meditating upon *The Prophet*.

MAN AND PROPHET

Some editions of the book include Gibran's haunting image of Almustafa, the prophet, which bears an uncanny resemblance to himself. This is hardly a mistake. For biographer Suheil Bushrui, the parallels between Gibran and the book's prophet are clear: Gibran is Almustafa; the island of Almustafa's birth is Lebanon; and Orphalese is America, where Gibran has been exiled. Like his protagonist, Gibran longed to return home to Lebanon. In the end, he realizes that it is his destiny to raise consciousness where he is, in the West.

Fans of the book were often surprised that the Levantine sage was actually living on West 10th Street in lower Manhattan. Despite the renown and extra money that his book was bringing in, Gibran never moved from his one-bedroom apartment there, a space filled with paintings and candles which he called 'the Hermitage'. Indeed, his reaction to the success of *The Prophet* was complex. He had once told Mary Haskell: 'The difference between a prophet and poet is that the prophet lives what he teaches – and the poet does not. He might write wonderfully of love, and yet not be loving.'

Gibran found it hard to live up the expectation that he *was* The Prophet. He had always been driven, with a work ethic fuelled by coffee and cigarettes, and in his mid-40s began to drink more. His newfound success in America did little to assuage his feeling that he was not living up to his own high expectations. His death, in 1931, was brought about by cirrhosis of the liver.

Gibran should perhaps not have been so hard on himself, and fully believed the messages of his famous book. *The Prophet* is a metaphor for the mystery of life: we come into the world, try to make sense of it, then go back to where we came from. At the end of our days, life can sometimes feel like a short dream. Gibran tried to express that the separation we feel from other people and all forms of life while on earth is not real. As Almustafa looks forward to his journey away from Orphalese, he feels as if he is 'a boundless drop in a boundless ocean'. We are mere expressions of a greater unity.

This feeling that we are a temporary manifestation of an infinite is not only comforting, but has the ring of truth. It has been felt by countless sages throughout human history. It also accounts for the feeling of peace and liberation that we feel in reading *The Prophet.*

SOURCES

Acocella, Joan, 2008. 'Prophet Motive: The Kahlil Gibran Phenomenon', *The New Yorker*, 7 January.

Bushrui, Suheil and Jenkins, Joe, 1998. *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*. Oxford: Oneworld.

Butler-Bowdon, Tom, 'Kahlil Gibran – The Prophet', in *50 Spiritual Classics: Your Shortcut to the Most Important Ideas on Enlightenment, Discovery and Purpose*. London: Nicholas Brealey, 2003.

Gibran, Kahlil G. and Gibran, Jean, 2017. *Kahlil Gibran: Beyond Borders*, London: Head of Zeus.

Waterfield, Robin, 1998. *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*, London: Penguin.