



NAXOS
AudioBooks

**CLASSIC
FICTION**

NA346312D



Kahlil Gibran

**The
Prophet
&
The
Wanderer**

Read by
Robert Glenister

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Kahlil Gibran

The Prophet & The Wanderer

There is always a division with visionaries and mystics. Their work lies in between states – neither purely literary nor solely religious, the humanity of the creator at odds with the holiness implied in the text. And this is very much the case with Kahlil Gibran. For some, he is a spiritual adviser of the first order, a man whose ability to reach Christians, Muslims, those of other faiths and non-believers alike makes him a model for societies riven by religious divides. For others he represents nothing so much as the personification of vacuous New Agery, unsustainable by the foundation of dogma or formal teaching. For some, his language is resonant, powerful, deceptively simple; for others it is derivative and pretentious. On the one hand, a self-serving man who used others to further his own image and success; on the other a thinker and artist who is uniquely able to draw together strands of thought and belief that otherwise

separate people.

Kahlil Gibran was born in Bsharri, in what is now Lebanon, in 1883. At the time it was a part of the Ottoman Empire, something Gibran would rail against in later life, calling for it to be returned to its Syrian past. In his early childhood, however, he was introverted, shy and thoughtful. There was no state education, but his mother was a member of a Maronite Christian family, and he received Bible instruction from an early age. In 1895, as a result of his father's gambling debts and imprisonment for tax fraud, the family – without the father – emigrated to the United States. They went to Boston, a city chosen because of its large Syrian population; but whatever the comforts of having others in a similar position, it must have been desperately hard for Gibran's mother to make enough of a living from just peddling goods to support her four children. For

Gibran himself, however, it was the beginning of a crucial development.

At school, his artistic abilities were noticed and nurtured, and he was introduced to the avant-garde artist Fred Holland Day, and thereby to a whole world of cultural activity. Day also introduced him to other elements of faith and belief. After reading one of Day's suggestions, Gibran said: 'I am no longer a Catholic: I am a pagan.' Three years later, he returned to Beirut to continue studying there, but here again the interpretation of the story is complex. On the one hand this was because he wanted to develop his ability in Arabic, where his fluency was not much better than it was in English. But it is also possible that his mother was concerned that his success in Boston – where he had already drawn designs for some book covers – needed a little tempering; or even that he had fallen under the seductive spell of an older woman (who may or may not have been Josephine Peabody, someone who was to play a major role later in his life). Whatever the reason, his mother's plans were

foiled: in Beirut Gibran was noticed for his unconventional attitudes, his determination, his strong will, his individuality and (always a sign of a troublesome imagination) his long hair.

But he was profoundly shaken by a series of family tragedies that in 1902 brought him back to America. One of his sisters died before he could make it back to be with her; his half-brother Peter (his mother had been married before) fell victim to TB; and then his beloved mother died as a result of cancer. These left him deeply distressed, but with the help of his other sister, and the sale of the family shop, he was free to pursue his creative work. In 1904, his first exhibition was well-received, and it was at this time that he met the most significant woman of his adult life. Mary Elizabeth Haskell was a headmistress ten years his senior, and for much of the rest of his life she would guide and assist him, both artistically and financially. Their relationship was a profound one, although she refused his proposal (the age difference being cited as the reason). But it was as a result of her help that he studied in Paris for two years,

possibly under Rodin.

After settling in New York in 1912, Gibran continued writing in both Arabic and English, joining magazines and literary societies, several with specifically Arab or Lebanese / Syrian concerns. His writings were already irritating the Ottoman authorities, either because they dealt with issues such as corruption in the Church or prostitution, or because he was demanding an end to the Ottoman Empire itself, something he hoped the First World War would facilitate. But he was also publishing works of a more general nature and continuing to paint. Gradually his art and books became well-known, and he became something of a celebrity, which he greatly enjoyed; to such an extent that he began dropping old friends and mythologizing himself, an act made all the easier by his obscure and exotic origins.

In 1923, he published *The Prophet*, essentially a series of essays on how to live disguised as the sayings of a prophet, and written in a deliberately formal, old-fashioned style. Its language echoes the King James Bible and William Blake,

Nietzsche and Jung (whom he had met and drawn), and although not hugely successful at the time became a *vade mecum* for the counter culture of the 1960s, something that has not eased Gibran's passage into general critical acceptance. But Gibran's language in *The Prophet* (and his other works) is an attempt at something more subtle than self-help or guruism. Having found himself at the mercy of competing languages and cultures all his life, he wanted to create a kind of universal language, one that places the hero both everywhere and nowhere. As he wrote to Mary: 'The whole Prophet is saying one thing: 'You are far, far greater than you know – and all is well.' One of the great strengths of *The Prophet* is its calm, measured, gentle and even humorous tone, delivering statements about the ideal relationship between humans and each other, or humans and their God. This rarefied warmth and inspired composure gives the work its almost sacred sense of timelessness and beauty.

In the late 1920's Gibran became seriously ill, partly through a heart

complaint, partly through his nervous disposition and partly (despite Prohibition) through an alcohol problem that became a circular route of self-destruction – his principal discomfort was from a liver disorder, but he drank to quench the pain of it. He died in 1931. There was two days' mourning in America, and he was finally buried at the monastery of Mar Sarkis in his hometown, where he was received as a hero. The monastery is now a museum dedicated to him. But as with so much of his life, earthly controversy surrounded what appears to be something approaching beatification. His decision to leave so much of his money to his home town and the people of Lebanon deeply upset his relatives; and the town itself squabbled over it so much that the government had to be called in to settle the matter.

The Wanderer was his last work, and was published posthumously in 1932. It is effectively a series of fables very much in the style of Aesop, though with more than a nod to the Sufi writer Rumi as well, while being uncompromisingly Gibran's own vision of the world.

Gibran's works have never been more popular, selling in their millions; but his personality and his personal life remain areas of angry contention. Is he really a seer of genuine insight? Or a portentous self-aggrandiser who took advantage of those around him? And perhaps even more difficult, if the work he has left moves you, touches you, makes you reconsider aspects of life and living, does it matter?

Notes by Roy McMillan



Robert Glenister's varied theatre credits include *Measure for Measure*, *The Tempest* and *Little Eyolf* for the Royal Shakespeare Company; *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* and *Hamlet*. His television credits include *Heartbeat*, *Midsomer Murders*, *A Touch of Frost*, *Bramwell*, *Prime Suspect*, *Only Fools & Horses* and *Soldier Soldier*. He has also read the part of Lovburg in *Hedda Gabler* for Naxos AudioBooks

Kahlil Gibran The Prophet & The Wanderer

Read by **Robert Glenister**

Kahlil Gibran's best-known works are life-lessons told in the forms of parables or essays. Since their publication they have become something like secular Bibles, or contemporary beatitudes, their apparent linguistic simplicity having a profound resonance for readers all over the world.

Gibran, born in Lebanon but living in America, was trying to tie together a number of different forces – religions, language and nationality among them – to create something that was not dependent on location or history to have meaning. Today, as competing theologies continue to threaten each other, his warmth and humanity remain both comforting and inspiring.

CD ISBN:

978-962-634-463-7

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Produced & edited by Roy McMillan
Recorded at Motivation Sound Studios, London
Mastered by JD Evans

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Total time
3:43:22