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# THE PROPHET

By Kahlil Gibran

Publisher Sebastiano Vottari

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## PREFACE

### ***The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran — A Work That Belongs to Eternity**

#### **I. The Man Behind the Voice: Kahlil Gibran Between East and West**

To fully understand *The Prophet*, one must first understand the man who wrote it—or rather, the man through whom this work, as he himself would say, was transmitted to the world. Kahlil Gibran was born on January 6, 1883, in Bsharri, a small village in the mountains of northern Lebanon, in the heart of a land that for millennia had been a crossroads of civilizations, languages, religions, and spiritual traditions. Born into a Maronite culture deeply rooted in Eastern Christian tradition, but also nourished by Sufi poetry, Neoplatonic philosophy, and the mystical currents of Islam, Gibran grew up in a world where the sacred and the everyday were never truly separated, where the mountains, the sea, and the wind were not simple landscapes but living interlocutors in an ongoing cosmic dialogue.

His family emigrated to the United States in 1895, settling in Boston's South End, then home to a large community of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants. It was a traumatic yet extraordinarily fruitful experience of uprooting: the young Khalil found himself navigating two worlds, two languages, two aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities that seemed irreconcilable but which, in his soul, merged into something entirely original. He returned to Lebanon for a time to complete his education, studying classical Arabic and the poetry of the great Eastern tradition; then he returned to America, settled in New York, and there, amid the silence of

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his studio on West 10th Street—which his friends affectionately called "The Temple"—he developed over the years and decades the visions that would give rise to his most celebrated works.

Gibran was a painter before he was a writer: his drawings and paintings, strongly influenced by William Blake and Rodin (who met him in Paris and recognized his talent), reveal the same visionary quality, the same tension between the corporeal and the transcendent that permeates his prose. One cannot read *The Prophet* without keeping in mind that its author thought in images, that for him every word was also a graphic gesture, a line of light traced in the darkness of the page.

## II. The Genesis of a Masterpiece: Twenty Years of Gestation

*The Prophet* was published in 1923 by Alfred A. Knopf of New York, but its gestation had begun much earlier—perhaps, as Gibran himself claimed, since adolescence. He claimed to have carried *Almustafa*, the Prophet, within himself for over twenty years, to have let him grow and mature like a fruit that must not be picked before the right time. There exist manuscripts and drafts dating back to his early youth, in which the work's fundamental ideas already appear in embryonic form, still shrouded in the vagueness of premonition but already luminous with the same light that would later illuminate the final pages.

This long incubation period partly explains the work's extraordinary coherence and organic unity: each phrase seems to have been pondered dozens of times, each image seems to emerge from a profound well of lived experience and inner meditation. There is nothing arbitrary or random in *The Prophet*: each word falls into place with the precision and necessity of a note in a Bach composition. Gibran worked on

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the final English version with obsessive care, polishing each sentence until it achieved the crystalline transparency that is one of the most immediately recognizable features of the work's style.

It's important to note that Gibran wrote *The Prophet* in English, not Arabic—a choice not without significance. English was his adoptive language, learned in adolescence, and perhaps precisely for this reason he wielded it with the freedom and wonder reserved for unexpected gifts. His English prose has an unmistakable quality: dense with biblical rhythms, imbued with Semitic constructions, enriched with images belonging to the Arabic-Persian poetic tradition, yet perfectly intelligible and resonant for the Western reader. It is a language that belongs to no national literary tradition but seems to spring from a universal source, beyond geographical and cultural boundaries.

### **III. The Structure of the Work: A Temple of Words**

*The Prophet* is divided into twenty-seven prose poems, each dedicated to a fundamental theme of human existence: love, marriage, children, work, joy and sorrow, beauty, death, and many others. This structure is not arbitrary: it reflects an organic and holistic conception of human life, in which every aspect of existence is intertwined with all the others in an inextricable fabric of meaning.

The narrative framework is masterfully simple. Almustafa—whose name, of clear Arabic origin, means "the chosen one," the "chosen one"—has lived for twelve years in the city of Orphalese, far from his native island. When his ship finally arrives to take him home, the townspeople surround him and ask him to speak, to share the wisdom he has gained during those years of observation, meditation, and silent love for the community that welcomed him as a stranger but loved him like

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a son. He accepts, and his answers to the questions of the Orphalese inhabitants form the body of the work.

This dialogical structure—the sage responding to the community's questions before taking his leave—has ancient roots. It recalls Plato's Socratic dialogues, the farewell discourses of the biblical prophets, and the conversations between master and disciple that are at the heart of the wisdom literature of every spiritual tradition, from Hinduism to Zen Buddhism, from Islamic Sufism to Jewish Kabbalah. But Gibran transforms it into something new: there is no argumentative dispute, no refutation, no dialectic in the strict sense of the term. Almustafa does not demonstrate—he evokes. He does not convince—he awakens. His words do not address the rational mind but the heart, that depth of the soul where truth is not learned but recognized, as one recognizes the face of someone one has always loved.

The character of Almitra, the seer who first believed in Almustafa and who first asks him to speak, is a figure of extraordinary symbolic importance. She represents the feminine soul of the community, the receptive and intuitive principle capable of opening itself to revelation without attempting to contain or define it. Her silent presence at the end of the work—alone on the dock, watching the Prophet's ship disappear into the mist—is one of the most moving moments in all of twentieth-century literature.

#### **IV. The Themes: A Map of the Human Condition**

Every theme addressed by Almustafa is approached with a methodology that we could define as paradoxical: the Prophet does not offer definitions but images, does not propose solutions but opens spaces, does not close questions but expands them until they themselves become a form of answer.

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**Love** is perhaps the most central theme of the entire work, and the chapter dedicated to it is one of the most powerful in the entire history of world literature. Gibran radically breaks with the romantic idea of love as the fusion and annihilation of the individual: the love he describes is at once sweet and merciless, a cosmic force that "crowns you and crucifies you," that "gathers you like sheaves of wheat" to then beat you, sift you, grind you to whiteness, so that you may become "sacred bread for the sacred banquet of God." This vision of love as a process of transformation and inner purification, which recalls the themes of Sufi mysticism—and in particular the great tradition of Rumi—is as far removed as one can imagine from romantic sentimentality or consumerist hedonism. Love, for Gibran, is the path to the fullness of being, but it is a difficult path, requiring courage, surrender, and a willingness to suffer.

**Marriage** is treated with a wisdom that still resonates today, over a century later. The famous image of the "pillars of the temple standing apart" and the tree and the cypress "that grow not in each other's shadow" express a vision of marital union as an alliance between free and distinct beings, not as the dissolution of individualities into an undifferentiated whole. True love, for Gibran, does not reduce but amplifies, does not close but opens, does not possess but liberates.

**Children** are often misunderstood: they are not the property of their parents, nor are they extensions of their egos or tools for realizing unfulfilled ambitions. They are arrows shot from their parents' bows toward a target they themselves cannot see, toward a future that belongs to Life itself, not to families. This vision has profound pedagogical and ethical implications, and resonates particularly powerfully in an era like ours, when the pressure exerted on younger generations to "fulfill" the expectations of others has become one of the most pressing problems in contemporary psychology.

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**Work** is celebrated not as an alienating necessity but as a calling and offering: "Work is love made visible." This phrase, perhaps the most quoted in the entire work, encapsulates a philosophy of work that transcends any political or economic ideology. Authentic work is neither servitude nor a mere means of subsistence: it is the way in which human beings incarnate in the world, it is the place where the visible and the invisible meet, where the toil of the hands becomes prayer and artisanal care becomes an act of love towards others and towards creation.

**Freedom**, a burning topic in every age, is explored with a subtlety almost unprecedented in modern literature. Gibran does not sing of freedom as an external conquest—the overthrow of tyrants, the destruction of chains—but identifies it with an internal process of liberation from one's own illusions, fears, and selfish desires. "Truly, what you call freedom is the strongest of these chains, though its links glitter in the sun and dazzle your eyes." A freedom that becomes a fetish of itself, that is worshipped as an end rather than experienced as a state of the soul, is not freedom at all but a subtle form of idolatry.

**Death**, addressed in the final chapter, dedicated to the great existential themes, is approached without terror or easy consolation. There is no promise of paradise or invitation to resignation: instead, there is an image of boundless beauty, in which dying is like "standing naked in the wind and melting in the sun," like freeing the breath "from its restless tides" so that it can "rise and expand and seek God unencumbered." Death, for Almustafa, is not the end but a threshold—the point where individual life rejoins universal Life, where the river finally reaches the sea from which it flowed.

## **V. Sources and Influences: A Crossroads of Traditions**

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*The Prophet* is a work that cannot be traced to a single cultural or religious tradition, and precisely this irreducibility to any label is one of the reasons for its universality. However, it is possible to identify some of the main currents that fueled Gibran's imagination and spirituality.

The **biblical tradition** is perhaps the most obvious: the rhythm of Gibran's prose continually recalls the Book of Psalms, the Song of Songs, the prophetic speeches of Isaiah and Ezekiel, and the Gospels. The figure of Almustafa has clear points of contact with that of Jesus—the itinerant teacher, the man who speaks with the authority of one who has seen the truth firsthand, the sage who must leave and promises to return—without the identification ever being explicit or exclusive.

**Sufi mysticism** is another fundamental source. The idea of love as a path to knowledge and transformation, the image of the flute mourning separation from the original Being, the concept of death as a return to the source—all these themes directly recall the great Sufi poetic tradition, particularly Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and Hafiz, authors whom Gibran knew deeply and loved with devotion.

Neoplatonism, and through it the Hermetic tradition and Renaissance philosophy, are present in the conception of the soul as a spark of divine fire, in the idea that the visible world is the reflection of an invisible and deeper reality, in the vision of man as a microcosm containing within himself the entire macrocosm.

Finally, **William Blake**—the English poet-prophet whom Gibran admired above all other Western writers—is present in the idea that poetic vision is the highest form of knowledge, superior to discursive reason, capable of grasping truths that academic philosophy cannot even come close to touching.

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## VI. Reception: From Bestseller to Sacred Text

The publishing history of *The Prophet* is, in its own way, an unprecedented phenomenon in 20th-century literature. Published in 1923, the book wasn't an immediate smash hit: initial reviews were mixed, and some contemporary literary critics dismissed it as sentimental or vague. But word of mouth among ordinary readers was immediate and unstoppable. Year after year, edition after edition, *The Prophet* continued to sell, to be read, given as gifts, copied by hand, and carried in the pocket like a talisman.

Today, over a century after its first publication, *A Prophet* is the best-selling English-language work of all time after the Bible—a record that alone speaks volumes about the nature and scope of this book. It has been translated into over a hundred languages and has inspired generations of artists, musicians, philosophers, and religious leaders of every faith and background. It is the book found at the bedside of the dying and on the bedside table of lovers, read in moments of crisis and moments of joy, rediscovered at every stage of life, always finding something new and necessary.

Throughout the twentieth century, *The Prophet* became a reference text for the most diverse cultural and spiritual movements: from Quakers to hippies, from civil rights movements to New Age communities, from progressive Christians to Sufi Muslims. This ability to transcend ideological, religious, and cultural boundaries is not the result of vagueness or indifference: it is the sign of authentic depth, of a vision that touches something so fundamental in the human experience that it transcends any particular affiliation.

## VII. The Garden of the Prophet: The Posthumous Sequel

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This edition also includes *The Garden of the Prophet* , published posthumously in 1933, two years after Gibran's death on April 10, 1931, in New York City, from cirrhosis of the liver at the age of just forty-eight. *The Garden of the Prophet* recounts Almustafa's return to the island of his birth, his forty days of solitude in the garden of his ancestors, and his final teachings to the nine disciples who follow him.

If *The Prophet* is a book of engagement with the world—of immersion in community life, of self-giving to the community— *The Garden of the Prophet* is a book of retreat and contemplation, of fruitful solitude, of returning to one's roots. The themes here become more subtle, more interior: nature as a living body, time as a dimension of eternity, self-knowledge as a path to the fullness of being, God as an immanent presence in every aspect of creation.

Almustafa's voice in the *Garden* is the same as the *Prophet's* , but something has deepened: there is a sweeter melancholy in it, a deeper awareness of the transience of forms and the eternity of essence, a more complete abandonment to the mystery of being. The nine disciples surrounding him ask different questions than those of the inhabitants of Orphalese: they are more intimate, more existential questions, more charged with that spiritual urgency that arises when one has walked long enough to begin to see the end of the journey.

The final scene of *The Garden* —in which Almustafa bids farewell to his disciples, literally melting into the sunset light and the mist rising from the sea—is one of the most beautiful and moving pages in all of universal mystical literature. Hafiz bending down and kissing the earth where his master had stood, the final words: "The garden is empty, yet it is filled with his voice"—these images remain imprinted on the reader's soul with the power and delicacy of an unforgettable dream.

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## VIII. Reading The Prophet Today: A Necessity, Not a Luxury

In an age like ours—marked by a profound crisis of shared values, by an increasingly self-referential individualism, by a speed that leaves no room for contemplation and depth—*The Prophet* is not just a great literary work: it is an antidote, a medicine, an urgent invitation to rediscover the fundamental questions buried beneath the frenetic surface of daily life.

Gibran reminds us that we are much more than we think we are. That love is greater than any formula that attempts to define it. That work can be prayer, and prayer can be silence, and silence can be the fullest form of communication. That freedom is not achieved by breaking down external walls but by unleashing internal chains. That death is not the enemy but the faithful companion who walks at our side, transforming every moment into something precious and unique.

These are not new ideas—Gibran himself never claimed to have invented them. They are truths as old as humanity, which each generation must rediscover anew, with its own tools and in its own language. Kahlil Gibran's extraordinary gift was to find the language—a language that spans centuries and cultures, that speaks directly to the heart without the need for intellectual mediation—to deliver them to us once again.

So read this book slowly, with respect and openness. Let Almustafa's words not slide across the surface of your mind but sink into the depths of your soul. Return to the passages that touched you most deeply, and return to them again, at different moments in your life: you will discover that each time they will say something different, because each time you are different, and the book—like any living work—will grow with you.

Because this, ultimately, is the greatest secret of *The Prophet* : it's not a book you read only once. It's a book you live, that you

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carry with you, that returns in dreams and conversations, that you open at random in moments of need and always returns, with miraculous precision, exactly the word you needed.

It is, in Almustafa's own words, "a word you have heard": and in the silence that follows that word, if you know how to listen, you will find the voice of all that you have been, of all that you are, and of all that you can yet become.

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*"Yet a little while, a moment's rest in the wind, and another woman will bear me."*

— Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

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*The Publisher*

## The Prophet

## The Arrival of the Ship

Almustafa, the chosen and beloved, who was a dawn on his own day, had waited twelve years in the city of Orphalese for his ship that was to return and take him back to the island of his birth.

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And in the twelfth year, on the seventh day of Ielool, the month of harvest, he climbed the hill outside the city walls and looked out to sea; and he saw his ship coming through the mist. Then the doors of his heart opened wide, and his joy flew far out over the sea. And he closed his eyes and ...

END PREVIEW