



## The Timeless Wisdom of Kahlil Gibran: An Overview of His Select Works

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### Abstract

Wisdom has been considered, since the time of Plato and Aristotle, as one of the greatest virtues human beings might possess. No amount of factual information would make an ordinary man into a virtuous or a wise man unless something is awakened in him – an innate ability to live the life of the soul. While knowledge is the outcome of information, persistent assimilation of knowledge and its application to life results in “Phronesis” (practical wisdom), a term used by Aristotle (*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 716). The words of the virtuous men are considered words of wisdom as they keep inspiring people irrespective of their caste, creed, culture and background. They illuminate their hearts, enlighten their minds, and elevate their souls. They train people to look at life with equanimity and good judgement.

Under such category fall some of the works of Kahlil Gibran as they present a comprehensive survey of human life in terms of love, marriage, children, friendship, death, nature and God. In and through his works like *The Prophet*, *Sand and Foam*, and *The Madman*, Gibran communicates in a simple, romantic and inspiring style the profound truths of human existence. According to Barbara Young, his works are appealing and consoling to people not because of their charm and beauty or rhythm and music but because they touch and stir our spirit with a finger of fire (*This Man from Lebanon* 65).

This paper draws upon the timeless wisdom of Kahlil Gibran by examining his select works which would give us a taste of his wisdom and an insight into life predicaments.

**Keywords:** Kahlil Gibran, virtuous, truth, wisdom

## Gibran's Life

Kahlil Gibran, a popular 20<sup>th</sup> century writer and popularly known as the author of *The Prophet*, is a Lebanese-American poet, writer, philosopher, painter, and mystic. He was born in 1883 in Bsharri, in the north of modern day Lebanon. During his early years, due to poverty and persecution, his family migrated to Boston in the United States in 1895. But Gibran went back, in 1898, to Lebanon to study Arabic, and spent a couple of years (1908-1910) in Paris, learning and practising art. He finally settled down in New York in 1911. Gibran died in St. Vincent's Hospital in New York on April 10, 1931. He is known for his paintings as well as writings, both in English and in Arabic.

As opposed to the negligent nature of Khalil, Gibran's father towards his family, his mother and the daughter of a Maronite clergy man, Kamileh, was a loving parent and ambitious for her children. She, though without any formal education but with innate intelligence and wisdom, greatly influenced her son, Gibran, igniting his imagination with the folk tales and legends of Lebanon as well as other stories from the Bible. He acknowledged this saying, "It is her mothering *me* I remember—the inner me" (*Beloved Prophet*336). Gibran, who experienced the love and care of his mother, expressed his great respect and love for her in his *Broken Wings*, as he said, "The most beautiful word on the lips of mankind is the word 'Mother,' . . . It is a word full of hope and love, a sweet and kind word coming from the depths of the heart . . . She is the source of love, mercy, sympathy, and forgiveness. He who loses his mother loses a pure soul who blesses and guards him constantly (*Greatest Works*407).

Gibran's outstanding literary influence comes from William Blake. While he was in Paris he was introduced to Blake and he read the complete works of Blake. Blake's understanding of life, of the church, and of the divine have greatly influenced him. In his letter to Mary Haskell on 6 Oct 1915 he writes, "Blake is God-man . . . and his vision, putting aside his drawings and his poems, is the most godly" (*Beloved Prophet* 260). She also acknowledged Blake's influence in her letter to Gibran, "Blake is mighty. The voice of God and the finger of God are in what he does . . . He really feels closer to you" (296).

Mary Haskell herself had influenced Gibran. He developed a close friendship with her and she mentored and encouraged him to write in English. Their relationship was akin to that of Jesus and Mary Magdalene (*Man and Poet* 114) which he echoed in his work *Jesus the Son of Man*, "Other men love themselves in your nearness. I love you in yourself . . . I alone love the unseen in you" (*Complete Works*4081). Their relationship lasted his lifetime.

Gibran wrote a lot of books (both poetry and prose) in Arabic and English. Among his well-known works are *The Prophet*(1923), *Sand and Foam*(1926), *A Tear and A Smile*(1914), *Nymphs of the Valley* (1906), *Spirits Rebellious*(1908), *Broken Wings* (1912), *The Madman* (1918), *The Forerunner* (1920) *Jesus the Son of Man* (1928), *The Earth Gods* (1931), and *The Wanderer* (1932) published posthumously.

Gibran's works speak heavily of love and friendship. His words are filled with wisdom and are very relevant today. His concepts on friendship and love and personal freedom in any relationship are noteworthy. He was truly a man much ahead of his times. He died in 1931, at the age of 48. He was a genius, a revolutionary, a rebel, a visionary, and was extremely open-hearted, open-minded, and spiritual as well.

## Wisdom

Wisdom has been considered, since the time of Plato and Aristotle, as one of the greatest virtues human beings might possess. It has been classified into three—wisdom as *sophia*, a special gift of the philosopher and of the one devoted to contemplative life in pursuit of truth; wisdom as *phronesis*, the practical wisdom that locates the prudent course of action not giving into passions and sense-deceptions; and wisdom as *episteme*, a form of scientific knowledge (Robinson 14).

Wisdom is the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding and insight. It is “the integration of deeper insight into generally known facts, reflective ability on one's limitations, and empathic/benevolent perspective taking” (Grossmann 235). It “represents a truly superior level of knowledge, judgment, and advice . . . used for the good or well-being of oneself and that of others . . .” (Baltes 123). No amount of factual information would make an ordinary man into a virtuous or a wise man unless something is awakened in him – an innate ability to live the life of the soul.

Many religions use the terms ‘wisdom’ and ‘enlightenment’ interchangeably to refer to the spiritual awakening in a person. While knowledge is the outcome of information, persistent assimilation of knowledge and its application to life results in wisdom. The words of the virtuous men are considered words of wisdom as they keep inspiring people irrespective of their caste, creed, culture and background. They illuminate their hearts, enlighten their minds, and elevate their souls. They train people to look at life with equanimity and unbiased judgement.

Under such category fall some of the works of Kahlil Gibran as they present a comprehensive survey of human life in terms of love, marriage, children, friendship, death, nature and God. In and through his works like *The Prophet*, *Sand and Foam*, and *The Madman*, Gibran communicates in a simple, romantic and inspiring style, the profound truths of human existence. According to Barbara Young, his works are appealing and consoling to people not because of their charm and beauty or rhythm and music but because they touch and stir our spirit with a finger of fire (*This Man* 65).

## Wisdom in Gibran's Select Works

The wisdom of Gibran is showcased in his outstanding work *The Prophet* which brought him international acclaim. It is a testimony to his genius. "The lines and words are so pregnant with meaning that it is very difficult for one to absorb Gibran's philosophy from one reading" (Daoudi 14). The book presents Gibran as a writer with a prophetic wisdom. He speaks the words of wisdom through Almustafa, the protagonist, as he addresses the people of Orphalese before his departure from the land of Orphalese.

Referring to love, Gibran writes: "When love beckons to you, follow him . . . For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning" (*Greatest Works* 10-11). About marriage, he speaks: "You were born together, and together you shall be for evermore . . . even in the silent memory of God. But let there be spaces in your togetherness. And let the winds of the heavens dance between you" (16). Referring to children, he says: "Your children are not your children . . . They come through you but not from you" (42). Referring to clothing he notes: "Your clothes conceal much of your beauty, yet they hide not the unbeautiful" (42). "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked . . . they are inseparable. Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed" (37-38). Gibran did believe in the reincarnation and realization of a greater self. Almustafa concludes his farewell: "A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind, and another woman shall bear me" (114).

Gibran speaks of human realities and relationships in terms of love, marriage and children so plainly. They are part of life and source of both joy and sorrow. Of all, love is the binding or uniting force of human relationships. He advocates that love is the essence of human existence. He says in his work *Tears and Laughter* that "everything bespeaks love" (55). It builds the family and society, creates in the heart of people care and concern for one another. It brings understanding between the spouses and unites parents to children and children to parents. Human bonding is possible only through love. However, Gibran lays emphasis on the freedom of children as they grow up and parents must create a healthy atmosphere for the growing children as they have a mind of their own.

*Sand and Foam*, published in 1926, is a collection of aphorisms—pieces of wisdom—strung together like pearls across the pages. It speaks of a variety of topics. Speaking of generosity, Gibran says: "Generosity is not in giving me that which I need more than you do, but it is in giving me that which you need more than I do" (*Greatest Works* 34). He further notes, "Those who give you a serpent when you ask for a fish, may have nothing but serpents to give. It is then generosity on their part" (35). He exhorts us to be fair even to our enemies as he prays, "I have no enemies, O God, but if I am to have an enemy, let his strength be equal to mine, that truth alone may be the victor" (39). He advises, "It is wiser for the lame not to break his crutches upon the head of his enemy" (43). He further says that there is no enmity in death, "You will be quite friendly with your enemy when you both die" (39).

True generosity is in giving to others what we actually are in need of. Mother Theresa is quoted as saying “Give until it hurts [you].” It is a virtue celebrated in every society and culture across the globe. Sometimes it may be misunderstood that the giver is not generous because we don’t know what sacrifices he has made.

His maiden work in English, *The Madman*, is a collection of parables and poems. The title of the book “The Madman” came to be thus: “His masks stolen, he was walking naked, as every traveller from the physical to the metaphysical is bound to be. Seeing his nakedness, someone on a house-top cried: ‘He is a madman’” (Naimy 61).

Gibran beautifully presents in “The Grave-digger” what ought to be our attitude towards death: “Of all those who come here to bury [their dead selves], you alone I like . . . Because they come weeping and go weeping—you only come laughing and go laughing” (40). He wonderfully presents God-human relationship as follows: “I [human] am thy root in the earth and thou [God] art my flower in the sky” (10).

Gibran, in his writings, has touched upon almost all the important areas of human life in relation to God, nature, and others, unveiling his prophetic wisdom. In a very simple yet philosophical language and diction, he brings out profound truths of human existence. His romantic style is elegant, resonant and communicates his message powerfully. We note in his *Sand and Foam*: “A shy failure is nobler than an immodest success,” (*Greatest Works* 60) or “When either your joy or your sorrow becomes great the world becomes small” (70) or “An exaggeration is a truth that has lost its temper” (59).

The ecological concern of Gibran is amazing, “Trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky. We fell them down and turn them into paper that we may record our emptiness” (*Greatest Works* 20). Gibran advocates that the beauty of nature must be preserved and laments that man due to his egocentric desires disfigures the natural beauty with his technological advancements which enslaved him. Gibran says: “when man invents a machine, he runs it; then the machines begin to run him, and he becomes the slave of his slave” (*Spiritual Sayings* 39).

Gibran deplores the lack of spirituality in modern society as a result of its materialistic nature, oppressive man-made laws, and institutionalized religion that prevents individual’s realization or experience of God. This forces the seekers of truth to leave the society and seek God in solitude. Gibran in his book *Between Night and Morn* speaks of it through Yusif El Fakhri in the short essay on “The Tempest.” Yusif says, “I came to this far corner of God’s domain for I hungered to learn the secrets of the Universe, and approach close to the throne of God” (*Greatest Works* 110). According to Gibran religion is not an end in itself but a means to help people elevate their soul towards union with God, the creator of the universe. He advocates universal religion as he says in his *Spiritual Sayings*, “In my thoughts there is only one universal religion whose varied paths are but



the fingers of the loving hand of the Supreme Being” (92) and says that “all of us [are] brothers before the face of heaven” (Greatest Works 319).

## Conclusion

Gibran poured into his works his very soul filled with the timeless wisdom that is inspiring and relevant today. He distinguishes moral values and wise teachings for each of life issues. The principle of his message is taken from all religions hailing love, and mutual understanding. Much of his creative power draws its impetus from different religions. He believes in a peaceful world of mutual help and mission of humanity. His wisdom is accessible to people across time and the globe. He is not only a poet of Lebanon but also the poet of the world. Reading his works is not only pleasurable but also enlightening.

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