

Chandler, Paul-Gordon. *In Search of a Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Kahlil Gibran* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield), 2017

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Not being one who resonates with biographies, I reluctantly accepted the task of reading *In Search of a Prophet* by Paul-Gordon Chandler and writing this book review. I am glad that I overcame my initial hesitation. Chandler clearly states in the *Introduction*, “This is not a biography... It is an exploration into Kahlil’s depth of spirituality through his remarkable life and profound works.” (p. 6) The book definitely is not a biography as it does not deal with much of Gibran’s life, especially his life before he moved from Lebanon to the USA. Yet, Chandler succeeds in giving the reader a tantalizing glimpse into the public and private face of the Lebanese American poet and artist.

In researching for the book, Chandler followed the steps of Gibran, beginning in his birthplace in Bsharri, Lebanon to his death in New York and finally to his burial in Bsharri. He attempted to visit the places that Gibran used to live at or frequent, at times impossible because of the many decades that have elapsed. Nevertheless, despite many places not still standing, Chandler makes the encounters come alive, as when he was bemused at one woman, who had a copy of *The Prophet* but did not know that Gibran used to live in the same building some decades back. (pp. 65-66)

Gibran, of course, is best known for his book, *The Prophet*. The reader would, like me, be a little frustrated if he/she expected a treatment of this book from the outset because Chandler has arranged his material chronologically, first addressing Gibran’s earlier works before moving to his later works. In retrospect, this is understandable because it allows the reader to get a feel for how Gibran’s ideas and thoughts changed over time. One of the main changes we see through

the book is how Gibran matured and became softer around the edges, being less willing to be openly abrasive, having changed his focus from institutional religion to a more non-sectarian spirituality.

In addition to giving the reader some delectable quotes from Gibran's works, Chandler also gives us access to correspondence between Gibran and some of his closest friends, including Mary Haskell, who became his lifelong benefactor, May Ziadah, a Lebanese-Palestinian journalist and admirer, and Mikhail "Mischa" Naimy, his childhood friend. These excerpts from private correspondences give a window into how Gibran processed his ideas, including what he was able to put into publication and what he had to hold back.

Chandler also roots Gibran to the history and geography of his life, by relating Gibran's encounters with some influential people in almost every stage of his life. Notable among these are the sculptor Auguste Rodin, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, and the spiritual leader 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Most people who have heard of Gibran probably know him only as the author of *The Prophet*. Hence, it would be easy to conclude, as I did, that Gibran was primarily an author or poet. Chandler's book, however, reveals that Gibran was also, if not primarily, an artist. It was to hone his skills as an artist that Haskell sponsored his two years stay in Paris, during which he was able to rub shoulders with the celebrated Rodin, who was instrumental in guiding Gibran to other artists as well.

Chandler does well to depict Gibran as a precocious youth, who, when a teacher told him that every student had to climb the ladder of knowledge one rung at a time, retorted with, "Does not the teacher know that the bird does not ascend a ladder in its flight?" (p 31) Yet, Gibran was also quick to admit where he lacked knowledge, for when he first saw the works of Leonardo da Vinci, he reflected, "It was as if a ship lost in the fog had suddenly found a compass." (p. 17) Indeed, toward the end of his life, he had developed a deep sense of humility saying, "A mystic is someone who has drawn aside one more veil." (p. 71)

Chandler shows how deeply Gibran was affected by loss in his life. Having lost a sister, a brother, and his mother in a span of eighteen months, Gibran slowly came to realize, as he writes in his story "Khalil the Heretic" from his book *The Heretic*, that, "Truth is like the stars,

which cannot be seen except beyond the darkness of night.” (p. 37) Indeed, this embracing of sorrow and pain made him gravitate toward artists like Eugène Carrière, who Gibran said, “Knew that tears make all things shine.” (p. 44) So completely did Gibran embrace suffering that he asked in his book *Sand and Foam*, “Do not the spirits who dwell in the ether envy man his pain?” (p. 90)

As mentioned earlier, Chandler retracted Gibran’s steps through his life. At each stage he draws the reader in with picturesque descriptions of the surroundings. One is able to catch a vision of what he was seeing and what, perhaps, Gibran saw in his day. Through this Chandler provides the reader with a link between the twenty-first century and the times of Gibran, allowing us to realize that Bsharri has changed very little while New York is markedly different. This gives the reader a heads up should he/she attempt to retrace Gibran’s steps - satisfaction in Bsharri, disappointment in Boston and New York, and a mixture in Paris.

All in all, *In Search of a Prophet* was a delightful read. As an exploration into Gibran’s spirituality the book succeeds remarkably well. Hence, it would seem that Chandler has achieved his goal in writing the book. However, it does much more. Chandler gives the reader a variegated and inviting selection of hors d’oeuvres through the quotes from Gibran and his friends as well as some from incidental acquaintances. This whets the readers palette to consume more of Gibran’s poetry. I can think of no better praise for a secondary source than that it would lead the reader to the primary sources. Hence, I would highly recommend *In Search of a Prophet* to all who wish to get a taste of Gibran’s spirituality and thought, a spirituality that contains an inherent tension which can be understood in Haskell’s words, “He lives in two worlds - Syria and America - and is at home in neither.” (p. 27)

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