



# GIBRAN AND THE CEDARS

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**T**he landscape of Kahlil Gibran's childhood and youth and of his early poetry was Bisharri and the country immediately surrounding it in the north of Lebanon, with the Holy Cedar Grove dominating the scene. When in Lebanon during his schooldays, he spent his summers at Bisharri, and after his emigration in 1894 to the United States, this part of Lebanon became the object of his yearning and a constant source of his inspiration:

... And I remember, too, the beautiful spot in North Lebanon. Every time I close my eyes I see ... those valleys full of magic and dignity and those mountains covered with glory and greatness trying to reach the sky.

The country around Bisharri fascinated Gibran's mind and stirred his imagination: the ancient Cedars, the magnificent valley of Kadisha; the myriad streams, rivulets and waterfalls; in the background, leaning against God's shoulder, the awe-inspiring mountains of Sannin and Famm al-Mizab, dominating both sea and sky. These were the scenes that first fired the mind of the poet. Bisharri seemed to have been left untouched by the forces which were robbing America of her countryside:

We who live amid the excitements of the city know nothing of the life of the mountain villagers. We are swept into the current of urban existence, until we forget the peaceful rhythms of simple country life, which smiles in the spring, toils in summer, reaps in autumn, rests in winter, imitating nature in all her cycles. We are wealthier

than the villagers in silver or gold, but they are richer in spirit. What we sow we reap not; they reap what they sow. We are slaves to gain, and they the children of contentment. Our draught from the cup of life is mixed with bitterness and despair, fear and weariness; but they drink the pure nectar of life's fulfillment.

Reminiscences of Bisharri and the Lebanese countryside fill his letters and conversations with friends, and colour all his work. Impressions of Bisharri and the cedars remained with him until the end of his life:

The most beautiful thing in life is that our souls remain hovering over the places where we have once known happiness. I am one of those who remember such places regardless of distance or time. I do not let one single phantom disappear with the cloud, and it is my everlasting remembrance of the past that causes my sorrows sometimes. But if I had to choose between joy and sorrow, I would not exchange the sorrows of my heart for the joys of the whole world.

Among the mountains, hills, streams, waterfalls and little copses, he rejoiced in "savouring the delights of freedom" that stimulated his boyish dreams and reveries. For him that was a period "when man's teacher is nature, and humanity is his book and life is his school." Everything revealed a message: "the distant caves echoed their songs of praise and victory"; mist, cloud, earth, snow, bird, beast, flower, tree and leaf "sent forth the Word of Life." He was thus invited to Life's

splendid feast where "the villages reposing in peace and tranquillity upon the shoulders of the valley rise from their slumber; church bells fill the air with their summons to morning prayer. And from the caverns echo the chimes as if all Nature joins in reverent prayer."

The world of his childhood was full of silence in which he heard "the hymns of the ages and songs of the firmament announcing the secrets of the Unseen." No other place had the same fascination for Gibran. The Cedar area and its neighbourhood were rich with historical and legendary associations. They were the arena of great battles between gods and fighting men; in the vicinity of the Cedars prehistoric civilizations had developed, to be followed by the Phoenicians, the ancient Egyptians, the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Arabs:

The phantoms of past ages walk in the valleys,  
In the heights the Spirits of Kings and Prophets  
wander.

My thoughts have turned towards the places of  
remembrance

And shown to me the might of Chaldea and the  
pride of Assyria and the nobility of Arabia.

Reared as a Maronite Catholic, and well acquainted with the Bible, Gibran could not miss the significance of his surroundings, nor could he forget with what reverence the sacred text made reference to both Lebanon and the Cedars, which it imbues with symbolic stature indicating power and longevity. The Psalmist's cry in his song of praise had linked for all time the tree with the land and with God: "the trees of the Lord are full of sap; the cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted." Elsewhere in the Bible the name given to the country of his birth becomes a term synonymous with beauty: "His countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars."

Early in his life he came to love his beautiful homeland, a love that developed over the years to become the greatest passion in his life, and to include a still greater love for all mankind:

I am kindled when I remember the place of my  
birth, and I lean in longing toward the house  
wherein I grew... I love the place of my birth  
with some of the love for my land; I love my  
country with a little of my love for the world, my  
homeland.

But for Gibran the words "Lebanon" and "cedar" were interchangeable and came to mean one and the same thing. Neither was valued simply for its own sake, but for what it evoked. Lebanon was not merely the name of a mountain but "a poetical expression" capable of almost infinite extensions of meaning; while the word "cedar", became

linked in his mind with what he called "the continuity of life" and stirred in him spiritual longing akin to religious ecstasy.

Spring is beautiful everywhere, but it is most beautiful in Lebanon. It is a spirit that roams round the earth but hovers over Lebanon, conversing with Kings and Prophets . . . repeating with the Holy Cedars of Lebanon the memory of an ancient glory.

The sacred branches of the cedars spread to encompass within their shade Wadi-Kadisha (The Holy or Sacred Valley) associated with Mar Maroon, the patron saint of Lebanon. It was here that Saint Maroon, in the early days of Christianity, found the followers who championed his cause, adopting for their ritual the Aramaic language, which was spoken by Jesus, and developing a liturgy and ecclesiastical chant which are among the most musical in the Christian world of today. But in this very spot, where Christian Lebanon found its spiritual birth, pagan Lebanon received the seasonal visits of Adonis, who deserted Mount Olympus every spring to return to his native hills in the environs of the sacred Cedars. It pleased Gibran to observe young girls of Christian faith casting flower petals into the spring that "sing their way to the sea" unaware that they were celebrating the return of Adonis from the realms of death. The name is of Phoenician origin (from *adon*, "lord"), Adonis himself being identified with Tammuz. Once more Gibran's ancestors had enriched the world with an enduring symbol of humanity, linking the worlds of ancient Greece and Phoenicia.

For Gibran the East and the West, the pagan and the Christian, the ancient and the modern, the past and the present, came together to reaffirm his faith in the "Unity of Being"; and the image of the eternal re-birth of beauty and passion in Adonis joined forces with the message of Christ, who taught selfless love, so that this in turn confirmed him in his passionate belief in the healing power of Universal Love.

Bisharri was the home of the families of both his parents, the Gibrans and the Rahmis; and for him these families came to represent a world of heroic achievement, an ideal world of peace and order, as opposed to the confusion of contemporary history, and that material civilization he described as "running on wheels." For Gibran his relatives, and above all his mother, possessed the character to enable them to lead a "heroic" life in which he saw represented all the human ideals he believed in. In the people of Bisharri, and the inhabitants of the countryside he knew as a young man, he saw the true children of Lebanon fully engaged in the business of life:



Let me tell you who are the children of my Lebanon:

They are the farmers who would turn fallow field into garden and grove.

They are the shepherds who lead their flocks through the valleys to be fattened for your table meat and your woolens.

They are the vine-pressers who press the grape to wine and boil it to syrup.

They are the parents who tend the nurseries, the mothers who spin silken yarn.

They are the husbands who harvest the wheat and the wives who gather the sheaves.

They are the builders, the potters, the weavers and the bell-casters.

They are the poets who pour their souls in new cups.

They are those who migrate with nothing but courage in their hearts and strength in their arms but who return with wealth in their hands and a wreath of glory upon their heads.

They are the victorious wherever they go and loved and respected wherever they settle.

They are the ones born in huts but who died in palaces of learning.

These are the children of Lebanon; they are the lamps that cannot be snuffed by the wind and the salt which remains unspoiled through the ages.

They are the ones who are steadily moving toward perfection, beauty and truth.

In this setting, with its personal and ancestral associations, Gibran wished to be buried. He took inspiration from the landscape, and the people of Bisharri, and the countryside girdled by the forest of the cedars; and it was understandable that he should wish to go back to them "and remain there forever." He died at the age of forty-eight on 10 April 1931 in New York; four months later his body was brought back to Lebanon and arrived at the port of Beirut on 21 August. The casket carrying his remains was then taken to his hometown to be placed on a carved bier within the little crypt in the Chapel of Mar Sarkis, an ancient monastery, rugged and dark, hewn out of the very side of the mountain, and within walking distance from Bisharri and the house where he was born. All around him the mighty cedars stand in silent majesty reiterating his own words:

The cedars upon thy breast are a mark of nobleness and the towers about thee chant thy might and valour, my love.

The Prophet of Lebanon chose to return to "the cedars in the garden of God," and to Bisharri where life's short journey began - in the words of *The Prophet* :

The stream has reached the sea, and once more the great mother holds her son against her breast.

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