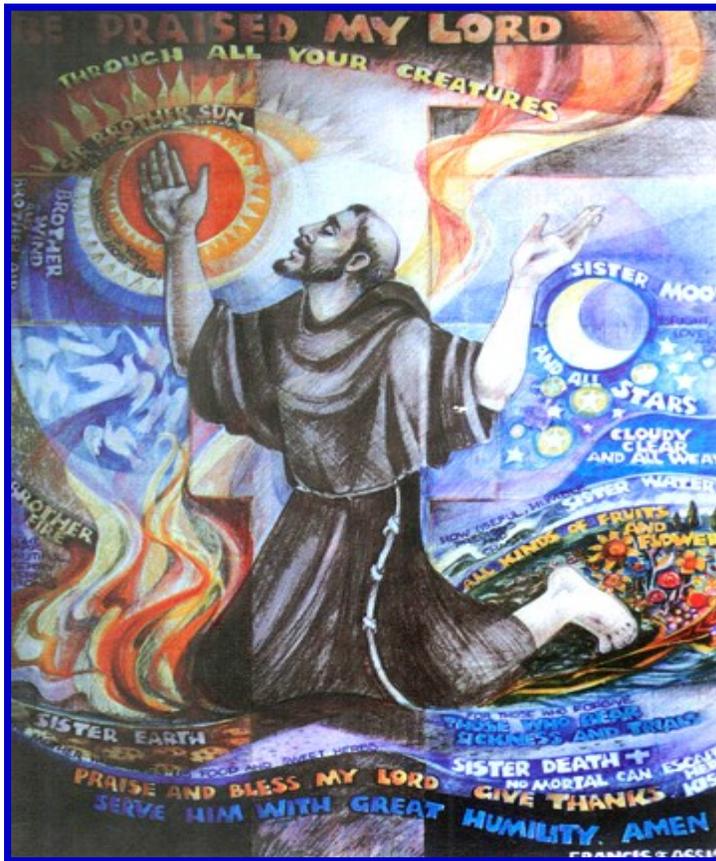


*Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,  
from whom no one living can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.  
Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,  
for the second death shall do them no harm.*

*Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks  
and serve Him with great humility.*



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## The Cosmos and the "Words" of the Bible



# The Cosmos and the "Words" of the Bible

by don Giuseppe De Virgilio

With the wish to comprehend how God has spoken to man we shall consider certain keywords from Sacred Scripture on the meaning of life and true happiness. St. Francis of Assisi loved the Gospel and embraced its radical message of love with joy. In his well-known praise of Creation in his Canticle of the Creatures, the Poor One of Assisi contemplated the cosmos. Everything spoke to him of its Creator. He praised Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the Stars, Sister Water, Brother Fire – all of creation was a temple of prayer to him.

## In the Beginning God Created

In the ancient Hebrew language there is no word that corresponds to the Greek word kosmos (cosmos, world), and in which is inherent the idea of order, harmony and beauty. The Hebrew word olam is used to refer to the cosmos and which signifies literally "eternal," "forever," with the extended sense of world understood as something "created," "stable" and "prolonged in time." Thus the earth that we inhabit is conceived as a part of a "whole" (the universe) which consists of three spatial realities described as: the heavens, the earth (and sea) and the depths beneath (the place of sheol: cf. Dt 33, 13 – 16; Am 9, 2). The earth, in Biblical cosmography, is generally seen as a flat disk surrounded by ocean and above this are the heavens (or the firmament) like a dome or a hollow sphere. And above these heavens are the heavenly ocean. In Sacred Scripture there is no concept or understanding of "space" as an empty container, of something that must be filled. Space does not exist if there is not something in it. The concept of "time" too, is inseparable from the reality of creation that endures (the heavens, the earth, the seasons etc.). The notion of the calendar is not a reality that can be abstracted from the flow of time, but bound to the unfolding of the whole cosmos and mankind in God's creation. For this reason the cosmos, in the Bible, is not a fixed entity, but rather an "event," a dynamic process that unfolds following laws willed by God.

# The Canticle of the Creatures

Francis composed The Canticle of the Creatures, known also as The Canticle of Brother Sun, during the spring of 1225, when he was sick at San Damiano, and was cared for by Clare and the Poor Sisters. The Canticle was composed in the Umbrian dialect and contains three sections: a praise of God for the creatures (sun, moon, stars, wind, water, fire, earth), a praise for those who forgive for the love of God, and a praise for sister bodily death. Only the first section of the Canticle was composed at San Damiano, whereas the section on forgiveness was composed in the episcopal palace in Assisi where the sick Francis resided for some weeks in September 1226, and the section on sister death was composed at the Portiuncula, some time before Francis died on October 3, 1226.

*Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,  
Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor, and all blessing,  
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,  
and no human is worthy to mention Your name.  
Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,  
especially Sir Brother Sun,  
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.  
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;  
and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,  
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,  
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night,  
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
who sustains and governs us,  
and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.  
  
Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love,  
and bear infirmity and tribulation.  
Blessed are those who endure in peace  
for by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.*

Before the cosmos, man is called to live with responsibility and to protect what God has wished to assign to him. Faith allows us to interpret the facts of science and opens us up to the mystery of the Absolute. Only in faith can we live in an authentic way seeking the "desire" for God (from the Latin: de siderum = to seek an answer from the stars) and knowing how to ascend from "creatures to the Creator," to sing His praises.

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## God Lives in the Heavens

The heavens as observed by man from the earth, are described as a vault over which extends the firmament. In the descriptions of Sacred Scripture are found images from the orient: above the visible firmament are found other heavenly spheres "the heaven above the heavens" (Dt 10, 14; 1 Kings 8, 27). The heavens have openings like windows or floodgates (cf. Gen 7, 11; 2 Kings 7, 2) through which the waters above the firmament and contained by the heavenly vault, can flow forth. The heavens rest on pillars (cf. Job 26, 11) with foundations, which spread out like a curtain (cf. Is 40, 22; 44, 24; Ps 104, 2), and unfold like a scroll that can be torn (cf. Is 43, 4). Symbolically the heavens represent the transcendent dwelling of God: God lives there with all the heavenly beings who praise Him (cf. Ps 19, 2; 29, 9).

In the progressive unfolding of these images that represent God, He is represented as "He who inhabits the heavens" and who descends to the earth from His throne above the firmament (cf. Ex 19, 18), with His Word (cf. Ps 89, 3; 119, 89). In late Judaism, so as not to pronounce the name of God, the word "heaven" is used for the divinity; the word "heaven" indicates the Lord and His power (cf. Dan 4, 26). According to Judaic tradition the heavens are inhabited by the Angels who guard the heavenly treasures and here also are the books in which all the deeds of mankind are inscribed before the day of our final judgment. The same Judaic tradition believes in the existence of a hierarchy and different choirs of angels.

## **A New Heaven and a New Earth**

The New Testament, in continuity with the Old Testament, affirms that God created the heavens and that at the end of time He will re-create "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21, 1). In heaven are the angels who work as servants and messengers of God. Satan was cast out of heaven and hurled down into the abyss where he can no longer sentence believers (cf. Lk 10, 18; Rev 12, 12; 19, 1). In the Pater Noster, the prayer to God our Father in which we say "who art in Heaven" (Mt 6, 9), we find the most known use of this word, and the reason why believers must not seek their reward in this world but to lay up their treasure in heaven (cf. Mt 6, 20). The destiny of believers, their lasting home, is not in this world but in heaven (cf. 2 Cor 5, 1). This is the home of everlasting peace, and which is symbolized by the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Gal 4, 26).

### **The Stars**

In the well-known narration of the creation of the world, the sacred writer describes the creation of the stars in two phases: first, with the creation of the firmament (cf. Gen 1, 6-8) and then with the creation of the sun, the moon and the stars (cf. Gen 1, 14-19). The purpose of this simple narration is to convey a theological truth, that the whole universe and everything it has, is something good (tob = good/beautiful). The stars are not perceived as divine beings, but physical bodies subject to the law and power of Almighty God (cf. Bar 6, 59) and according to an ordered design (cf. Jer 31, 35-37; Judg 5, 20).

These elements of the firmament emerge again to represent in a figurative way different people. For example in Joseph's dream, his parents are represented by the sun and moon, and his eleven brothers by eleven stars (cf. Gen 37, 9-10). The stars often appear in the imaginary use by the prophets, and take on various meanings. In the preaching of the prophets we are warned against the temptations of diviners and sorcerers with their astrology (cf. Is 13, 10; Jer 27, 9).

## **Christ "The Morning Star"**

The motive of the star with its symbolism is present in the well-known prophecy of Balaam (cf. Nm 24, 17) and it returns in the narration of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. It is narrated that the Magi, who were expert astrologers, followed the star that arose in the East and led them to Judea (cf. Mt 2, 2 - 10). The account describes how these pagan kings wished to meet Christ who had come into this world and to worship Him (cf. Mt 2, 11). The star is the symbol for something splendid and positive, it is a messianic sign that leads believers to encounter God. The book of Revelations, rejoicing in the risen Christ presents Jesus as "the bright morning star" and who promises to give the "morning star" to His victorious disciples, to demonstrate that they will share with Him the place and glory of heaven (cf. Rev 22, 16).

The seven angels also, of the seven churches in Revelations, to which the letters were sent, are symbolized by seven stars held in Christ's right hand (cf. Rev 2, 1; 3, 1). The image of the stars, in this symbolism in Revelations, indicates the heavenly power that comes from the Holy Spirit and whose action continues throughout history.

### **From Creatures to the Creator**

The mystery of the universe, its immensity, its origins and final goal cannot be separated from faith in God. Mankind cannot fulfill God's designs alone that is by a solidarity and respect for creation however profound and great it may be. Man is neither a simple spectator nor a mere beneficiary of the cosmic dimension, but he receives every day the gift of creation from the hand of God and experiences the providential greatness of the Creator (cf. Mt 6, 26 - 30).