

## The Seven Sermons to the Dead

Translated by Bishop Stephen Hoeller

Seven exhortations to the dead, written by Basilides in Alexandria, the city where East and West meet.

### The First Sermon

1. The dead came back from Jerusalem, where they did not find what they were seeking.
2. They asked admittance to me and demanded to be taught by me, and thus I taught them:
3. Hear Ye: I begin with nothing. Nothing is the same as fullness. In the endless state fullness is the same as emptiness. The Nothing is both empty and full. One may just as well state some other thing about the Nothing, namely that it is white or that it is black or that it exists or that it exists not. That which is endless and eternal has no qualities, because it has all qualities.
4. The Nothing, or fullness, is called by us the *PLEROMA*. In it thinking and being cease, because the eternal is without qualities. In it there is no one, for if anyone were, he then would be differentiated from the *Pleroma* and would possess qualities which would distinguish him from the *Pleroma*.
5. In the *Pleroma* there is nothing and everything: it is not profitable to think about the *Pleroma*, for to do that would mean one's dissolution.
6. The CREATED WORLD is not in the *Pleroma*, but in itself. The *Pleroma* is the beginning and end of the created world. The *Pleroma* penetrates the created world as the sunlight penetrates the air everywhere. Although the *Pleroma* penetrates it completely, the created world has no part of it, just as an utterly transparent body does not become either dark or light in color as the result of the passage of the light through it.
7. We ourselves, however, are the *Pleroma*, so it is that the *Pleroma* is present within us. Even in the smallest point the *Pleroma* is present without any bounds, eternally and completely, for small and great are the qualities which are alien to the *Pleroma*.
8. The *Pleroma* is the nothingness which is everywhere complete and without end.
9. It is because of this that I speak of the created world as a portion of the *Pleroma*, but only in an allegorical sense; for the *Pleroma* is not divided into portions, for it is nothingness.
10. We, also, are the total *Pleroma*; for figuratively the *Pleroma* is an exceedingly small, hypothetical, even non-existent point within us, and also it is the limitless firmament of the cosmos about us.
11. Why, however, do we discourse about the *Pleroma*, if it is the all, and also nothing?

12. I speak of it, in order to begin somewhere, and also to remove from you the delusion that somewhere within or without there is something absolutely firm and definite. All things which are called definite and solid are but relative, for only that which is subject to change appears definite and solid.
13. The created world is subject to change. It is the only thing that is solid and definite, since it has qualities. In fact, the created world is itself but a quality.
14. We ask the question: how did creation originate? Creatures indeed originated but not the created world itself, for the created world is a quality of the *Pleroma*, in the same way as the uncreated; eternal death is also a quality of the *Pleroma*.
15. Creation is always and everywhere, and death is always and everywhere. The *Pleroma* possesses all: differentiation and nondifferentiation.
16. Differentiation is creation. The created world is indeed differentiated. Differentiation is the essence of the created world and for this reason the created also causes further differentiation.
17. That is why man himself is a divider, inasmuch as his essence is also differentiation. That is why he distinguishes the qualities of the *Pleroma*, yea, those qualities which do not exist.
18. These divisions man draws from his own being. This then, is the reason for man discoursing about the qualities of the *Pleroma*, which do not exist.
19. You say to me: What good is it then to talk about this, since it has been said that it is useless to think about the *Pleroma*?
20. I say these things to you in order to free you from the illusion that it is possible to think about the *Pleroma*.
21. When you speak of the divisions of the *Pleroma*, we are speaking from the position of our own divisions, and we speak about our own differentiated state; but while we do this, we have in reality said nothing about the *Pleroma*. However, it is necessary for us to talk about our own differentiation, for this enables us to discriminate sufficiently. Our essence is differentiation. For this reason we must distinguish individual qualities.
22. You say: What harm does it not do to discriminate, for then we reach beyond the limits of our own being; we extend ourselves beyond the created world, and we fall into the undifferentiated state which is another quality of the *Pleroma*. We submerge into the *Pleroma* itself, and we cease to be created beings. Thus we become subject to dissolution and nothingness.
23. Such is the very death of the created being. We die to the extent that we fail to discriminate. For this reason the natural impulse of the created being is directed toward differentiation and toward the struggle against the ancient, pernicious state of sameness.
24. The natural tendency is called *Principium Individuationis* (Principal of Individuation).
25. This principle is indeed the essence of every created being. From these things you may readily recognize why the undifferentiated principle and lack of discrimination are all a great danger to

created beings.

26. For this reason we must be able to distinguish the qualities of the *Pleroma*. Its qualities are the PAIRS OF OPPOSITES, such as:
  27. the effective and the ineffective
  28. fullness and emptiness
  29. the living and the dead
  30. difference and sameness
  31. light and dark
  32. hot and cold
  33. energy and matter
  34. time and space
  35. good and evil
  36. the beautiful and the ugly
  37. the one and the many and so forth.
38. The pairs of opposites are the qualities of the *Pleroma*: they are also in reality non-existent because they cancel each other out.
39. Since we ourselves are the *Pleroma*, we also have these qualities present within us; inasmuch as the foundation of our being is differentiation, we possess these qualities in the name and under the sign of differentiation, which means:
  40. First--that the qualities are in us differentiated from each other, and they are separated from each other, and thus they do not cancel each other out, rather they are in action. It is thus that we are the victims of the pairs of opposites. For in us the *Pleroma* is rent in two.
  41. Second--the qualities belong to the *Pleroma*, and we can and should partake of them only in the name and under the sign of differentiation.
  42. We must separate ourselves from these qualities. In the *Pleroma* they cancel each other out; in us they do not.
  43. But if we know how to know ourselves as being apart from the pairs of opposites, then we have attained to salvation.
  44. When we strive for the good and the beautiful, we thereby forget about our essential being, which is differentiation, and we are victimized by the qualities of the *Pleroma* which are the

pairs of opposites.

45. We strive to attain to the good and the beautiful, but at the same time we also attain to the evil and the ugly, because in the *Pleroma*, these are identical with the good and the beautiful.
46. However, if we remain faithful to our nature, which is differentiation, we then differentiate ourselves from the good and the beautiful, and thus we have immediately also differentiated ourselves from the evil and the ugly.
47. It is only thus that we do not merge into the *Pleroma*, that is, into nothingness and dissolution.
48. You will object and say to me: Thou hast said that differentiation and sameness are also qualities of the *Pleroma*. How is it then when we strive for differentiation? Are we not then true to our natures and must we then also eventually be in the state of sameness, while we strive for differentiation?
49. What you should never forget is that the *Pleroma* has no qualities.
50. We are the ones who create these qualities through our thinking.
51. When you strive after differentiation or sameness or after other qualities, you strive after thoughts which flow to you from the *Pleroma*, namely thoughts about the non-existent qualities of the *Pleroma*. While you run after these thoughts, you fall again into the *Pleroma*, and arrive at differentiation and sameness at the same time.
52. Not your thinking but your being, is differentiation. That is why you should not strive after differentiation and discrimination as you know these, but strive after your true nature.
53. If you would thus truly strive, you would not need to know anything about the *Pleroma* and its qualities, and still you would arrive at the true goal because of your nature.
54. However, because thinking alienates us from our true nature, therefore I must teach knowledge to you, with which you can keep your thinking under control.

## **The Second Sermon**

1. During the night the dead stood along the walls and shouted: "We want to know about god! Where is God? Is God dead?"
2. --God is not dead; he is as much alive as ever. God is the created world, inasmuch as he is something definite and therefore he is differentiated from the *Pleroma*. God is a quality of the *Pleroma* and everything that I have stated in reference to the created world is equally true of him.
3. God is distinguished from the created world, however, inasmuch as he is less definite and less definable than the created world in general. He is less differentiated than the created world, because the ground of his being is effective fullness; and only to the extent that he is definite and differentiated is he identical with the created world; and thus is he the manifestation of the effective fullness of the *Pleroma*.

4. Everything that we do not differentiate falls into the *Pleroma* and is canceled out along with its opposite. Therefore if we do not discern God, then the effective fullness is canceled out for us. God also is himself the *Pleroma*, even as every smallest point within the created world, as well as within the uncreated realm, is itself the *Pleroma*.
5. The effective emptiness is the being of the Devil. God and Devil are the first manifestations of the nothingness, which we call the *Pleroma*. It does not matter whether the *Pleroma* is or is not, for it cancels itself out in all things. The created world, however, is different. Inasmuch as God and Devil are created beings, they do not cancel each other out, rather they stand against each other as active opposites. We need no proof of their being; it is sufficient that we must always speak about them. Even if they did not exist, the created being would forever (because of its own differentiated nature) bring them forth out of the *Pleroma*.
6. All things which are brought forth from the *Pleroma* by differentiation are pairs of opposites; therefore God always has with him the Devil.
7. This interrelationship is so close, as you have learned, it is so indissoluble in your own lives, that it is even as the *Pleroma* itself. The reason for this is that these two stand very close to the *Pleroma*, in which all opposites are canceled out and unified.
8. God and Devil are distinguished by fullness and emptiness, generation and destruction. Activity is common to both. Activity unites them. It is for this reason that activity stands above both, being God above God, for it unites fullness and emptiness in its working.
9. There is a God about whom you know nothing, because men have forgotten him. We call him by his name: ABRAXAS. He is less definite than God or Devil. In order to distinguish God from him, we call God HELIOS, or the Sun.
10. Abraxas is activity; nothing can resist him but the unreal, and thus his active being freely unfolds. The unreal is not, and therefore cannot truly resist. Abraxas stands above the sun and above the devil. He is the unlikely likely one, who is powerful in the realm of unreality. If the *Pleroma* were capable of having a being, Abraxas would be its manifestation.
11. Although he is activity itself, he is not a particular result but result in general.
12. He is active non-reality, because he has no definite result.
13. He is still a created being, inasmuch as he is differentiated from the *Pleroma*.
14. The sun has a definite effect and so does the devil; therefore they appear to us more effective than the undefinable Abraxas.
15. For he is power, endurance, change.
16. --At this point the dead caused a great riot, because they were Christians.

### **The Third Sermon**

1. The dead approached like mist out of the swamps and they shouted: "Speak to us further about the highest god!"
2. --Abraxas is the god whom it is difficult to know. His power is the very greatest, because man does not perceive it at all. Man sees the *summum bonum* (supreme good) of the sun, and also the *infinum malum* (endless evil) of the devil, but Abraxas, he does not see, for he is undefinable life itself, which is the mother of good and evil alike.
3. Life appears smaller and weaker than the *summum bonum* (supreme good), wherefore it is hard to think that Abraxas should supersede in his power the sun, which is the radiant fountain of all life force.
4. Abraxas is the sun and also the eternally gaping abyss of emptiness, of the diminisher and dissembler, the devil.
5. The power of Abraxas is twofold. You cannot see it, because in your eyes the opposition of this power seems to cancel it out.
6. That which is spoken by God-the-Sun is life; That which is spoken by the Devil is death. Abraxas, however, speaks the venerable and also accursed word, which is life and death at once.
7. Abraxas generates truth and falsehood, good and evil, light and darkness with the same word and in the same deed. Therefore, Abraxas is truly the terrible one.
8. He is magnificent even as the lion at the very moment when he strikes his prey down. His beauty is like the beauty of a spring morn.
9. Indeed, he is himself the greater Pan, and also the lesser. He is Priapos.
10. He is the monster of the underworld, the octopus with a thousand tentacles, he is the twistings of winged serpents and of madness.
11. He is the hermaphrodite of the lowest beginning.
12. He is the lord of toads and frogs, who live in the water and come out unto the land, and who sing together at high noon and at midnight.
13. He is fullness, uniting itself with emptiness.
14. He is the sacred wedding;
15. He is love and the murder of love;
16. He is the holy one and his betrayer.
17. He is the brightest light of the day and the deepest night of madness.
18. To see him means blindness;

19. To know him is sickness;
20. To worship him is death;
21. To fear him is wisdom;
22. Not to resist him means liberation.
23. God lives behind the sun; the devil lives behind the night. What god brings into birth from the light, that the devil pulls into the night. Abraxas, however, is the cosmos; its genesis and its dissolution. To every gift of God-the-Sun, the devil adds his curse.
24. All things which you beg from God-the-Sun, generate an act of the devil. All things which you accomplish through God-the-Sun add to the effective might of the devil.
25. Such is the terrible Abraxas.
26. He is the mightiest manifest being, and in him creation becomes frightened of itself.
27. He is the revealed protest of creation against the *Pleroma* and its nothingness.
28. He is the terror of the son, which he feels against his mother.
29. He is the love of the mother for her son.
30. He is the delight of earth and the cruelty of heaven.
31. Man becomes paralyzed before his face.
32. Before him there exist neither question nor answer.
33. He is the life of creation.
34. He is the activity of differentiation.
35. He is the love of man.
36. He is the speech of man.
37. He is both the radiance and dark shadow of man.
38. He is deceitful reality.
39. --Here the dead howled and raved greatly, for they were still incomplete ones.

#### **The Fourth Sermon**

1. Grumbling, the dead filled the room and said: "Speak to us about gods and devils, thou accursed

one!"

2. --God-the-Sun is the highest good, the devil is the opposite; thus you have two gods. But there are many great goods and many vast evils, and among them there are two god-devils, one of which is the BURNING ONE, and the other the GROWING ONE. The burning one is EROS in his form as a flame. It shines and it devours. The growing one is the TREE OF LIFE; it grows green, and accumulates living matter while it grows. Eros flames up and then dies away; the tree of life, however, grows slowly and reaches stately stature throughout countless ages.
3. Good and evil are united in the flame.
4. Good and evil are united in the growth of the tree.
5. Life and love oppose each other in their own divinity.
6. Immeasurable, like the host of stars, is the number of gods and devils. Every star is a god, and every space occupied by a star is a devil. And the emptiness of the whole is the *Pleroma*. The activity of the whole is Abraxas; only the unreal opposes him.
7. Four is the number of the chief deities, because four is the number of the measurements of the world.
8. One is the beginning; God-the-Sun.
9. Two is Eros, because he expands with a bright light and combines two.
10. Three is the Tree of Life, because it fills space with bodies.
11. Four is the devil, because he opens everything that is closed; he dissolves everything that is formed and embodied; he is the destroyer, in whom all things come to nothing.
12. Blessed am I, for it is granted unto me to know the multiplicity and the diversity of the gods. Woe unto you, for you have substituted the oneness of God for the diversity which cannot be resolved into the one. Through this you have created the torment of incomprehension, and the mutilation of the created world, the essence and law of which is diversity. How can you be true to your nature when you attempt to make one out of the many? What you do to the gods, that also befalls you. All of you are made thus the same and in this way your nature also becomes mutilated.
13. For the sake of man there may reign unity, but never for the sake of god, because there are many gods but only few men. The gods are mighty, and they bear their diversity, because like the stars they stand in solitude and are separated by vast distances one from another. Humans are weak and cannot bear their own diversity, because they live close to each other and are desirous of company, so that they cannot bear their own distinct separateness. For the sake of salvation do I teach you that which is to be cast out, for the sake of which I myself have been cast out.
14. The multiplicity of the gods equals the multiplicity of men. Countless gods are waiting to become men. Countless gods have already been men. Man is a partaker of the essence of the



gods; he comes from the gods and he goes to God.

15. Even as it is useless to think about the *Pleroma*, so it is useless to worship the number of the gods. Least of all is it of any use to worship the first God, the effective fullness and the highest good. Through our prayer we cannot add to it and we cannot take away from it, because the effective emptiness swallows everything. The gods of light compose the heavenly world, which is multiple and stretches into infinity and which expands without end. Their highest lord is God-the-Sun.
16. The dark gods constitute the underworld. They are uncomplicated and they are capable of diminishing and shrinking into infinity. Their deepest lord is the devil, the spirit of the moon, the serf of the earth, who is smaller, colder and deader than the earth.
17. There is no difference in the power of the heavenly and the earthly gods. The heavenly ones expand, the earthly ones diminish. Both directions stretch into infinity.

### **The Fifth Sermon**

1. The dead were full of mocking and cried: "Teach us, thou fool, about church and holy community!"
2. --The world of the gods is manifest in spirituality and sexuality.
3. The heavenly gods appear in spirituality, the earth gods appear in sexuality.
4. Spirituality receives and comprehends. It is feminine and therefore we call it MATER COELESTIS, the Heavenly Mother.
5. Sexuality generates and creates. It is masculine and therefore we call it PHALLOS, the earthly father.
6. The sexuality of man is more earthly, while the sexuality of woman is more heavenly. The spirituality of man is more heavenly; for it moves in the direction of the greater. On the other hand the spirituality of woman is more earthly; for it moves in the direction of the smaller.
7. Deceitful and devilish is the spirituality of the man who goes toward the smaller. Deceitful and devilish is the spirituality of the woman who goes toward the greater. Each is to go to its own place.
8. Man and woman become a devil to each other when they do not separate their spiritual paths, for the nature of created beings is always of the nature of differentiation.
9. The sexuality of man goes to that which is earthly; the sexuality of woman goes to that which is spiritual. Man and woman become a devil to each other if they do not discriminate between their two forms of sexuality.
10. Man shall know that which is smaller, woman that which is greater. Man shall separate himself from spirituality and from sexuality alike. He shall call spirituality mother, and he shall enthrone her between heaven and earth. He shall name sexuality phallos, and shall place it

between himself and the earth, for the mother and the *phallos* are super-human demons and manifestations of the world of the gods. They are more effective for us than the gods, because they are nearer to our own being. When you cannot distinguish between yourselves on the one hand, and sexuality and spirituality on the other, and when you cannot regard these two as beings above and beside yourselves, then you become victimized by them, i.e., by the qualities of the *Pleroma*. Spirituality and sexuality are not your qualities, they are things which you can possess and comprehend; on the contrary, these are mighty demons, manifestations of the gods, and therefore they tower above you and they exist in themselves. One does not possess spirituality for oneself or sexuality for oneself; rather one is subject to the laws of spirituality and sexuality.

11. Therefore no one escapes these two demons. You shall regard them as demons, as common causes and grave dangers, quite like the gods, and above all, like the terrible Abraxas.
12. Man is weak, therefore community is indispensable; if it is not the community in the sign of the mother, then it is in the sign of the *phallos*. Not to have community consists of suffering and sickness. Community brings with itself fragmentation and dissolution. Differentiation leads to solitude. Solitude is contrary to community. Because of the weakness of man's will, as opposed to the gods and demons and their inescapable law, there is need for community.
13. For this reason there shall be as much community as necessary, not for the sake of men but for the sake of the gods. The gods force you into a community. As much community as they force upon you is necessary, but more than that is evil.
14. In the community each shall be subject to another, so that the community will be maintained, inasmuch as you have need of it. In the solitary state each one shall be placed above all others, so that he may know himself and avoid servitude. In community there shall be abstinence.
15. In solitude let there be squandering of abundance. For community is the depth, while solitude is the height. The true order in community purifies and preserves. The true order in solitude purifies and increases. Community gives us warmth, while solitude gives us the light.

## **The Sixth Sermon**

1. The demon of sexuality comes to our soul like a serpent. It is half a human soul and is called thought-desire.
2. The demon of spirituality descends into our soul like a white bird. It is half a human soul and is called desire-thought.
3. The serpent is an earthly soul, half demonic, a spirit, and related to the spirits of the dead. Like the spirits of the dead, the serpent also enters various terrestrial objects. The serpent also induces fear of itself in the hearts of men, and enkindles desire in the same. The serpent is of a generally feminine character and seeks forever the company of the dead. It is associated with the dead who are earthbound, who have not found the way by which to cross over to the state of solitude. The serpent is a whore and she consorts with the devil and with evil spirits; she is a tyrant and a tormenting spirit, always tempting people to keep the worst kind of company.
4. The white bird is the semi-heavenly soul of man. It lives with the mother and occasionally

descends from the mothers abode. The bird is masculine and is called effective thought. The bird is chaste and solitary, a messenger of the mother. It flies high above the earth. It commands solitude. It brings messages from the distance, from those who have gone before, those who are perfected. It carries our words up to the mother. The mother intercedes and warns, but she has no power against the gods. She is a vehicle of the sun.

5. The serpent descends into the deep and with her cunning she either paralyzes or stimulates the phallic demon. The serpent brings up from the deep the very cunning thoughts of the earthly one, thoughts that crawl through all openings and become saturated with desire. Although the serpent does not want to be, she is nevertheless useful to us. The serpent eludes our grasp, we pursue her and she thus shows us the way, which, with our limited human wit, we could not find.
6. --The dead looked up with contempt and said: "Cease to speak to us about gods, demons and souls. We have known all of this in essence for a long time!"

### **The Seventh Sermon**

1. At night the dead came back again and amidst complaining said: "One more thing we must know, because we had forgotten to discuss it: teach us concerning man!"
2. --Man is a portal through which one enters from the outer world of the gods, demons and souls, into the inner world, from the greater world into the smaller world. Small and insignificant is man; one leaves him soon behind, and thus one enters once more into infinite space, into the microcosm, into the inner eternity.
3. In immeasurable distance there glimmers a solitary star on the highest point of heaven. This is the only God of this lonely one. This is his world, his *Pleroma*, his divinity.
4. In this world, man is Abraxas, who gives birth to and devours his own world. This star is man's God and goal. It is his guiding divinity; in it man finds repose. To it goes the long journey of the soul after death; in it shine all things which otherwise might keep man from the greater world with the brilliance of a great light.
5. To this One, man ought to pray. Such a prayer increases the light of the star. Such a prayer builds a bridge over death. It increases the life of the microcosm; when the outer world grows cold, this star still shines.
6. There is nothing that can separate man from his own God, if man can only turn his gaze away from the fiery spectacle of Abraxas.
7. Man here, God there. Weakness and insignificance here, eternal creative power there. Here is but darkness and damp cold. There all is sunshine.
8. Upon hearing this the dead fell silent, and they rose up like smoke rises over the fire of the shepherd, who guards his flock by night.
9. Anagramma: Nahtriheccunde Gahinneverahtunin Zehgessurklach Zunnus