The Manichaean Church and its structure have always represented a major concern for both antagonists in ancient times and modern scholars. Both the subdivision of the Manichaean community into two sections, Elect and Auditors, and the organization of the highest clerical degrees – twelve Teachers, seventy-two ‘Bishops’,¹ and three hundred and sixty Presbyters – have attracted the attention and the interest of many over the centuries. The latter scheme has been usually considered as the expression of an adaptation of the Manichaean Church organization to a Christian model, the one Mani surely knew from contemporary communities in Mesopotamia, particularly because of the number of the Teachers (see Augustine, de haer. 46). This tradition linking the Manichaean ecclesiastical structure to that of the contemporaneous Christian Church has been kept alive for centuries until the present.² On the other hand, regarding the subdivision of the community into two – clerics/Elect and laymen/Auditors with their

¹ I use the title ‘bishop’ here for the second dignity in the Manichaean hierarchy because of need of clarity in the exposition of the facts I wish to bring to the attention of the reader. Although the western tradition (attested in both Manichaean sources and also by adversaries such as Augustine, for example) has actually transmitted the title ἐπίσκοπος/episcopus for this degree, the oriental tradition in Middle Persian fragments from Turfan attests spsg/ispasag, also testified in Manichaean Chinese and Turkish texts as a loanword. A deep analysis of the Manichaean texts and of the secondary literature about ispasag has shown that this title did not mean ‘dean/servant’, as usually accepted, but it rather hinted at an administrative office of Achaemenid origin still existing also in Parthian and Sasanian times, the one of ‘eye of the king’, as rightly supposed by Schaeder 1934, 5, although the German scholar just inferred this without possessing any evidences in support of his thesis, evidences we can count on nowadays. For a detailed discussion about this see Leurini, forthcoming.

reciprocal relationships—scholars have taken the structure of the Buddhist communities into account, although a highly probable derivation from the Elchasaite gnostic model is maintained as a very probable component, too.3

Moving beyond such suppositions of organizational influence, one may consider possible ideological underpinnings for Manichaean Church structure. Tardieu, for example, maintains that three hundred and sixty, the number of Presbyters in the Manichaean Church, corresponds to the monthly calculation of the movement of the moon multiplied by the twelve solar months during one year; while seventy-two, the number of the Bishops, and twelve, the number of the Teachers, can be considered as corresponding to the number of missionary men Jesus sent out to diffuse his religion in the former case, and to the number of Christ’s Apostles in the latter.4 I find this position by Tardieu both interesting and tantalizing: the reasons given for why Mani chose these three numbers—seemingly from the Christian tradition on the one hand and from astronomy on the other—are actually irreconcilable with each other. Twelve and seventy-two show a completely different origin from three hundred and sixty, although the explanation by the French scholar appears as tenable as any that has been offered.5 The Christian interpretation does not account for the third numerical entity, while the astronomical one seems to provide no help with at least the number seventy-two. As the Manichaean hierarchy shows a clear pyramidal shape, an attempt to derive all three numbers from the same category would seem to be logically preferable, however. Besides any possible reference to a Christian model inspiring Mani, there were likely also intra-religious reasons bound to his cosmological conception of the world that may justify his choices as far as the clerical structure of his community is concerned. The link with astronomy proposed by Tardieu appears to offer more from an exegetical point of view than

---

3 In the Tebessa Codex the binary subdivision of the Manichaean community is bound to the Christian model deriving from the Pauline Letters. See Onont 1918; Alfärk 1920; Merkelbach 1988; Decret 1989; BeDuhn – Harrison 1997. Both Elchasaite (or more generally Gnostic) and Buddhist inspirations are taken into consideration by Tardieu 1981, cf. Tongerloo 1982, Koenen 1983, Sundermann 1997, and Lieu 1998, for example, while a pure Buddhist origin for this dichotomy is maintained by Widengren 1961.

4 Respectively in Luke 10.1 Syriac and Diatesseron, and Matthew 10.1–2; see Tardieu 1981, 74. This explanation has been supported by van Oort 2002.

5 See Widengren 1961, 100, who while not pointing to the astronomic pattern behind the number 360 seems to hint at it.