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Many Faced Gods: Triadic (Proto-)Structure and Divine Androgyny in Early Manichaean Cosmogony

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Abstract: This paper gathers together evidence that the Manichaean cosmogony was originally based on a trinitarian structure (Father, Mother, Child). This basic triad was subsequently expanded into various hypostases as the Manichaean myth evolved over time and across linguistic contexts.

Keywords: Manichaeism, Trinity, Androgyny, Gender, Cosmogony, Coptic, Syriac

For all these names ... are ... single from the beginning, living and enlightening, but they separated into all these parts during that first struggle. They were set in all these alternate forms and these many names. But, if all these varieties are stripped and all these appearances peeled away and separated from all these names, they will gather together and make a single form, a sole name, unchangeable and unalterable, forever in the land of their first essence, from which they were sent out against the enemy (*Kephalaia* 178.13-23).

Introduction

Scholars have long debated about the origins of the Manichaean cosmogony. Early in the twentieth century, some, spurred on by the enthusiasm of recent discoveries of original Manichaean texts in Iranian languages, saw the essential elements of the system as drawn from Iranian traditions and perpetuated the heresiological stereotype that considered Manichaeism as essentially a “Persian” religion.¹ At the time, however, F. C. Burkitt cautioned that, in spite of certain apparent “Iranian” features such as dualism, Manichaeism drew its impetus not from Iranian religious traditions, but from a Syriac Christian milieu.² This thesis was dramatically confirmed by the discovery of the Coptic codices from Medinet Madi in 1929, which promised to provide scholars with a wealth of new information about the intricate details of Manichaean liturgy, theology, and ethics. Unfortunately, however, after some initial progress in the 1930s, the publication of these codices stalled and in the post-war years the attention of scholars was diverted to either the discoveries at Qumran or the Nag Hammadi library. Burkitt’s position, though, was later re-emphasized by Peter Brown in his influential 1969 article “The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman

1 A. V. Williams Jackson, an Iranian language scholar, described Manichaeism as a “schismatic movement” and “offshoot of Zoroastrianism” (*Researches in Manichaeism*, 3-5). This Iranian thesis was also pushed by Widengren (*Mani and Manichaeism*, 73, 138) and popularized by Jonas, who in his influential *Gnostic Religion* wrote that Manichaeism represented an “Iranian” (p. 206) form of gnosis in contrast to Valentinianism, which he labelled a “Syrian-Egyptian” form of gnosis (p. 206).

2 Burkitt, *Religion of the Manichees*, 71-104.

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Empire.” Brown reminded readers that even though Manichaeism was viewed by Roman authorities as a sort of Persian “fifth column” within their borders, it was actually a product of the Syriac culture that straddled the borders of Rome and Persia. Later still, in light of the publication of the Greek *Cologne Mani Codex*, the Christian components came to be emphasized as being of central importance in discussions of Manichaean origins. Recently published materials from Kellis, as well as the Coptic version of Mani’s *Epistles*,³ have only provided additional support for Burkitt’s thesis. After all, in his surviving letters, Mani styles himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ.”⁴

Today, most scholars should be more or less convinced that Manichaeism, rather than being a “schismatic movement” of Zoroastrianism,⁵ was in actual fact an outgrowth of the heterodox forms of Syriac Christianity from Sassanian Persian. Yet in spite of this increasingly wide-spread conviction,⁶ its full implications have not been explored in terms of the formation of Manichaean cosmogony and theology.⁷ In their anthology of Manichaean texts, Iain Gardner and Samuel Lieu have made allusion to what seem to be “consciously trinitarian structures embedded in Mani’s system.”⁸ In this paper, I will draw together important suggestions from some recent studies and argue that the Manichaean cosmogonical narrative was based (at least initially) on a triadic “proto-structure” drawn primarily from Judaeo-Christian theological motifs, which placed emphasis on gender and androgyny, and that figures from the cosmogonic drama typically viewed as separate entities were in actual fact hypostasized manifestations or epithets of an original divine triad.

Triad I: The First Evocation

Theodore bar Khonai’s account of Manichaean cosmogony from his eighth-century *Book of Scholia*⁹ has, in spite of its late date, long been considered one of the most important witnesses to Manichaean terminology in Syriac¹⁰—the original language of Mani and his earliest disciples. According to this account, generally thought to be based on one of Mani’s canonical writings,¹¹ the Kingdom of Light is ruled by the “Father of Greatness” (ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܩܘܪܝܢܐ). In opposition to him, as ruler of the Kingdom of Darkness, is the “King of Darkness” (ܩܕܝܫܐ ܕܩܘܪܝܢܐ) who launches an invasion of the Light Kingdom. In response the dark invasion, the Father of Greatness, instead of sending any of his *shekinahs*, the tranquil powers that dwell with him, decides to send himself into battle. In order to do so, the Father of Greatness is said to “evoke” (ܩܘܪܝܢܐ) two additional beings out of himself (Theodore bar Khonai 313.27ff.) —the “Mother of Life” (ܩܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܗܝܘܐ) and

3 Gardner, *Kellis Literary Texts 2*.

4 Gardner, “The Reconstruction of Mani’s *Epistles*,” 93-104. See also the so-called *Fundamental Epistle* preserved in Latin by Augustine (Stein, *Manichaica Latina 2*) and the “Letter to Menoch” preserved by Julian of Eclanum (Stein, *Manichaica Latina 1*).

5 Even Iranian scholar Werner Sundermann has suggested that the so-called Zoroastrian elements in Manichaeism seem superficial and in fact any similarities may be the result of Manichaeism influence on later Zoroastrian texts (“Cosmogony,” 21-22). Sundermann even admits that there are more similarities in Manichaean cosmogony with Bardaisan than Zoroastrianism (“Cosmogony,” 22).

6 This position, that Manichaeism represents an independent Mesopotamian stream of early Christianity, has been recently reasserted by BeDuhn and Mirecki (see *Frontiers of Faith*, 2).

7 There even seems to be some lingering resistance to the idea that Manichaeism is ultimately an outgrowth of Christianity. For instance, Van Lindt in his 1992 study on *The Names of Manichaean Mythological Figures* suggests that Christian elements in Manichaeism are artificial additions in order to aid western missions (222). In some ways this is a remnant of the position adopted by some, such as Jonas, that Mani’s ideas somehow existed in a vacuum and that he was able to pick and choose as he saw fit elements from the religions around him (*Gnostic Religion*, 208). Similarly, PHEME PERKINS in an article for the *Encyclopaedia of Early Christianity* describes how Mani “encountered” Syriac Christianity” (708) and “adapted Christian themes” (708).

8 *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*, 13.

9 Theodore bar Khonai, *Liber scholiorum*, 2:313.10-318.4.

10 The major studies of this account, however, such as those by Cumont (a history-of-religions scholar; cf. *Recherches I*) and Jackson (an Iranist; cf. *Researches in Manichaeism*) were too preoccupied with Iranian associations to notice or address some of the text more interesting peculiarities. In fact, Cumont in particular went to great lengths to disassociate any Manichaean motif from Judaeo-Christian ideas.

11 According to Kugener and Cumont, Theodore drew upon the so-called *Fundamental Epistle* also known to Augustine (*Recherches II*, 151), while Tardieu believes it was Mani’s *Pragmateia* (*Le manichéisme*, 93).

the cosmological narrative. My suggestion is that if we look closely at the names of these two figures they may be understood as having served at some earlier stage simply as epithets for the Living Spirit. After all, what does the Living Spirit do other than command the five sons to *build* the foundations of the cosmos? In fact, in the *Kephalaia* a comparison is made between the Living Spirit and a “builder” or architect (1Ke 131.28) who constructs a dwelling for a king. The Living Spirit, in turn, can also be seen as *beloved* if she is understood as a phase-two hypostatic manifestation of the Mother of Life—who is herself a type of consort to the Father of Greatness.²² According to the *Kephalaia*, the Living Spirit is even said to set the cosmos in order along with Mother of Life (1Ke 56.8), revealing traces of an early close association between the two.

It is important to remember that one of the other well-attested names for the Mother of Life is the “Great Spirit” (See 1Ke 34.27-28, 49.21; 53.10; 79.29), an epithet that is closely connected to early Syriac conceptions of the Spirit as a feminine entity.²³ As was noted above, the creative power of spirit formed an important part of some strands of Jewish exegesis of the Genesis creation story. If such speculations formed part of the background out of which the Manichaean system was constructed, it does not seem like that much of a stretch to equate a being known both as the Mother of *Life* and the Great *Spirit* with a creative agent known as the *Living Spirit*.

One apparent problem lies in the fact that even though the Mother of Life is obviously a feminine being, the Living Spirit has typically been considered as a masculine entity. This ambiguity and confusion, however, is rooted not only in the way in which Manichaean technical terms were transmitted into various ancient languages, but also in theological readings of grammar, both ancient and modern. For example, the Syriac lexicographer Payne-Smith states that ܠܘܘܝܐ is normally feminine “except when used of the Holy Spirit” (533b).²⁴ This statement, however, reflects a theologically motivated interpretation of grammar, influenced of course by centuries of masculine exegesis of this particular term by Syriac speaking churches. The Manichaean Living Spirit, however, rooted in early Syriac images of spirit, would have originally been conceived as feminine, as a manifestation of the Mother of Life. The fact that the neuter word πνεῦμα was used in Greek created a gender ambiguity and an eventual shift in Coptic, in which ΠΙΝΕΥΜΑ, like all neuter Greek loan-words, is considered as a masculine noun.²⁵ As a result, when we read and interpret Coptic Manichaean texts, Coptic grammar necessitates that the Living Spirit be classified as a masculine entity.

Another problem concerning the gender of the Living Spirit lies in the way in which Theodore reports that the Living Spirit called forth “his sons” (ܘܘܠܘܝܐ), employing a masculine suffix (Theodore bar Khonai 314.17). It is not inconceivable that an eighth-century author such as Theodore, accustomed to the theologically masculine interpretation of “spirit” would have naturally used the masculine suffix when referring to the sons of a being he intuitively conceived of as masculine. It cannot be assumed that the wording employed by Theodore is in every case taken verbatim from Mani. Having said that, Theodore’s text *does* contain some traces of the earlier feminine conception of spirit. For instance, Theodore states that after the creation of the heavens and the earths the Living Spirit (Theodore bar Khonai 315.21ff.) “(with) the light that was left over from (the making of) the vessels *she made* (ܘܘܠܘܝܐ) the wheels: wind and water and fire” (trans. mine). In this case, a feminine verb form is used to describe the creative activities of the Living Spirit. Jackson, following Cumont, dismissed this verb form as a lapse on Theodore’s part due to the possibility of “spirit” taking both genders.²⁶ Again, Theodore’s eighth-century understanding and use of such a theologically charged word is not necessarily the same as Mani’s third-century conception. Besides, if as is so often supposed, Theodore was drawing on one of Mani’s canonical writings, then we cannot rule out and should be alerted to the possibility that in this instance Theodore has (inadvertently perhaps) preserved a small piece of Mani’s original conception of spirit.

²² In the *Kephalaia*, the epithets Mother of Life and Father of the Living, as well as Father of Life and Mother of the Living are used interchangeably (see 1Ke 291.11), implying a close connection between the two.

²³ Mother of Life equals Holy Spirit (See Schmidt and Polotsky, *Ein Mani-Fund*, 66).

²⁴ Payne Smith and Margoliouth, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*.

²⁵ The Spirit in mainstream Christianity suffered the same linguistic fate, which, according to Dillon, resulted in “an impoverishment and a distortion in orthodox Christianity in respect of the feminine” (“Female Principles in Platonism”, 107; cited by Cazalais, *Une interprétation chrétienne*, 68).

²⁶ See Jackson, *Researches in Manichaeism*, 238 n. 64, following Cumont, *Recherches I*, 31 n.1.

Perhaps the emergent, mainstream Christian theologies of spirit put pressure on Manichaeans to adapt their language accordingly. Or, perhaps the effort by Manichaeans to fully systematize and codify Mani's teachings, so apparent in the *Kephalaia*,²⁷ influenced the separation of the Living Spirit from the Mother of Life. Or, perhaps it was simply an accident of language and translation. At any rate, we should never assume that later Christian commentators shared the same interpretation of key terms as Manichaeans, even if they were part of a shared theological vocabulary. We should also not assume that Manichaeans themselves, influenced by the theological developments both inside and outside their church, shared the terminological conceptions of their founder.

Triad III: The Third Evocation

The third and perhaps most misunderstood triad in Manichaeism comes from the third evocation, since when looked at closely it constitutes a complex constellation of associations. According to Theodore's account, after the creation of the cosmos by the Living Spirit, then the Mother of Life, the First Man, and the Living Spirit together beseech the Father to bring forth a third evocation (Theodore bar Khonai 316.1-2) which comes in the form of the "Messenger" (ܡܨܠܗܢܐ).²⁸ This Messenger is then said to evoke "Twelve Virgins" (ܩܘܪܝܢܐܝܝܬܐ ܕܩܘܪܝܢܐܝܝܬܐ) and to order the Great Builder to construct a new earth and three wheels. Following this, the Messenger is said to do something quite extraordinary. He reveals his "male and female" forms to the male and female Archons, causing them to expel the light substance they had ingested. This results in the creation of various forms of plant and animal life from the male portion, as well as Adam and Eve from the female. Finally, we are told that "Jesus the Splendour" (ܝܫܘܥ ܕܩܘܪܝܢܐܝܝܬܐ; Theodore bar Khonai 317.15-16) appears to awaken Adam from his state of ignorance.

Theodore's account of the third evocation however becomes problematic when viewed in light of other early Manichaean sources. While Theodore states that the Messenger brought forth Twelve Virgins and Jesus the Splendour (although Jesus is not explicitly "called" in Theodore's account), *Kephalaia* Chapter 7 ("The Seventh, on the Five Fathers") states that the Third Messenger emanated three powers: 1) the Column of Glory/Perfect Man, 2) Jesus the Splendour, and 3) a single Virgin of Light (1Ke 35.7-17). Elsewhere, in *Kephalaia* Chapter 16 ("[On the Five] Greatnesses which have [come] out against the Darkness"), the third evocation is said to include the Third Messenger, the Column of Glory, and the "powers of light" revealed by him (1Ke 49.26-28). This indicates that even for the compiler of this chapter of the *Kephalaia*, there seems to have been a certain ambiguity as to who should be included. As a result, we are faced with three alternative formulations of the third evocation:

Theodore bar Khonai	<i>Kephalaia</i> Ch. 7	<i>Kephalaia</i> Ch. 16
Messenger	Third Messenger emanates	Third Messenger
Twelve Virgins	Column of Glory/Perfect Man	Column of Glory
Jesus the Splendour	Jesus the Splendour	"powers of light"
	Virgin of Light	

Clearly this was the most difficult phase of the cosmogony to formulate by polemicists and Manichaeans alike.

While it is clear that the Messenger is definitely part of the third triad, the remaining two members are ambiguous, since there are essentially three possible candidates: 1) some sort of virgin figure, 2) Jesus the Splendour, and 3) the Column of Glory, also known as the Perfect Man (2Ps 133.24-25; 1Ke 20.15; 24.23; 35.10; 37.3; 155.11). As in the case of the second invocation, a closer look at the names and activities associated with the third may help clarify the intended (or at least the "proto-") structure and reveal that the members

²⁷ See Pettipiece, *Pentadic Redaction in the Manichaean Kephalaia*.

²⁸ Interestingly, the Messenger isn't actually qualified as "Third" in Theodore's account, but rather simply as ܡܨܠܗܢܐ, "the Messenger." In Greek however he became ὁ πρεσβύτερος ὁ τρίτος, ΜΑΖΩΔΑΜΤ ΜΗΡΕΒΕΥΤΗΘ in Coptic, and tertius legatus in Latin.

of the third triad are essentially manifestations of the same being drawn from the first—namely First Man.

First of all, I would like to consider the epithet “Third Messenger.” Since it is clear, especially from Theodore’s account, that the individual whom he calls simply the “Messenger” is the principal actor of the third evocation, it should not be surprising that the ordinal term “third” came to be associated with this figure in later Manichaeism. There is, however, an added dimension when looked at in a somewhat broader context. According to Manichaeism, Jesus is the *third* in a series of divine messengers sent to humankind after Buddha and Zoroaster (*Kephalaia*, “Introduction,” 1Ke 7.18-35 and *Shaburagan*).²⁹ Thus, there seems to be an implicit equation on the prophetological level between Jesus and the Third Messenger,³⁰ thereby lending support to additional theological equations.

In her book on *Jesus in the Manichaean Writings*, Majella Franzmann rightly points out that a great deal of scholarly energy was expended during the twentieth century attempting to separate and classify the multiple varieties of Jesus in Manichaeism. Franzmann’s study re-affirms the position that, in actual fact, there is only one Jesus who appears in many guises.³¹ Whereas in proto-orthodox Christian theology there seems to have been a tendency towards the compression of various figures and motifs into the frame of a single triune god, Manichaeism, as we have seen, tended to elaborate the various figures into multiple hypostases, some of which seem to have evolved into distinct entities. In my view, however, the equations should not be restricted simply to unifying the various Jesus figures, since evidence suggests that Jesus himself was associated with other important cosmogonic figures of the third evocation. As was already stated, an argument can be made for considering the “Third Messenger” as a sort of prophetological epithet for Jesus, but he is also called in *Psalms-Book* 59.16 “the Perfect Man in the Pillar,”³² which means that Jesus the Splendour and the entity known as Column of Glory/Perfect Man were equated by Manichaeism themselves.

Even in spite of Theodore’s omission,³³ the puzzling figure known as Column of Glory/Perfect Man has an important, even central, role in the Manichaean cosmic drama, since it/he represents a critical part of the machinery of purification at both the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels—a parallelism commonplace in Manichaean thought patterns. On the one hand, the Column of Glory, the Manichaean name for the Milky Way,³⁴ was seen as the celestial conduit through which light particles liberated by Manichaean ritual may ascend to the “light ships,” i.e., the moon and the sun, and from there be transported back to the Realm of Light. The Perfect Man, on the other hand, is the microcosmic representation of this celestial column in the form of the human being, who, if he or she is a Manichaean, facilitates the liberation of light particles by means of the ritual meal. As such, the digestive system acts as a sort of interior column of light liberation. After all, as Theodore himself tells us, the human body was fashioned by the demons after the image of the Third Messenger, who, as we have seen, can be associated with Jesus the Splendour. This means that implicit associations may be made between the Third Messenger, the Column of Glory/Perfect Man, and Jesus the Splendour as manifestations of the same divine hypostasis.

A problem remains, however, in how the role of the Virgin in the triad of the third evocation should be interpreted. If we recall what Theodore tells us about the activity of the Messenger during the third evocation, we can see that the Messenger reveals his “male and female forms” to the Archons. The Messenger was (at an early stage at least) essentially an androgynous figure who, in turn, served as the model used by the

²⁹ According to the Muslim scholar al-Biruni, Mani placed himself fourth in a series of divine messengers: Buddha, Zoroaster, and Jesus (Sachau’s translation cited by Burkitt, *Religion of the Manichees*, 37. See also Tardieu, *Le manichéisme*, 19; Ort, *Mani*, 118).

³⁰ See Böhlig, “Manichaeism,” 1521.

³¹ Franzmann, *Jesus in the Manichaean Writings*, 144. The various Jesus figures in Manichaeism are surely no more “separate” than the Jesus as human being, *logos*, and eschatological judge that is portrayed by canonical Christian literature and theology. The centrality of Jesus to Mani’s own religiosity will only be confirmed by the publication of his *Epistles*, in which Mani styles himself as an “apostle of Jesus Christ.”

³² Cited by Franzmann, *Jesus in the Manichaean Writings*, 135.

³³ For some reason Theodore makes no mention of the Column of Glory/Perfect Man, although this figure is sufficiently well attested in other sources.

³⁴ Van Lindt, *Names*, 180; also, Böhlig, *Gnosis und Synkretismus*, 600-604.

demonic pair Ashqalun and Namrael when they fashioned Adam and Eve. In this way, great emphasis seems to have been placed on the importance of both sexes (either through pairs or androgyny) as aspects of divine being and human form. By extension, in light of the fact that Jesus the Splendour can be equated with both the Perfect Man and the Third Messenger, the Virgin of Light could be seen as (at an early stage at least) forming a pair with him in order to represent both aspects of the androgynous Messenger,³⁵ who, in turn, is a manifestation of the third member of the first divine triad—the First Man. First Man is essentially the divine prototype for Jesus and the Virgin, as well as Adam and Eve. In fact, Adam is even called “First Man” by both Mani (in *Kephalaia*, Chapter 1, [1Ke 15.11]) and a certain Babylonian catechumen who questions him about why the first humans seemed to live so long (1Ke 144.17).

Such associations should not be surprising in light of the fact that androgyny is a quality that was associated with both Adam and Jesus in certain streams of the early Christian tradition. According to evidence found in the *Adversus Arium* of Marius Victorinus, the human being created by God in Genesis 1:26-27 was androgynous. In fact, the text of Genesis cited by Victorinus reads “*fecit ipsum masculofeminam*” (*Adversus Arium*, IB 64.24) and forms the basis of his argument that if the first human being was androgynous, then the divine Logos should be equally androgynous as well.³⁶ This reading has also been identified in Coptic Papyrus B4,³⁷ which reads in Bohairic Ⲡⲟⲟϥⲧⲥⲓⲙⲓ,³⁸ and it was an idea attributed by Irenaeus to the followers of Mark the Magician (*Adversus haereses* 1.18.2).³⁹ A similar concept can also be found in writings from Nag Hammadi such as *On the Origin of the World* in which a drop of light falls from Sophia onto the water and causes the creation of an androgynous human being (NHC II,5 113). In the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, Jesus is made to describe how the Father revealed himself in the form of an immortal androgynous human being (NHC III,4 101; see also *Eugnostos* [NHC III,3 76]). Rabbinic traditions also feature ideas about the androgyny of Adam (e.g., *Bereshit Rabba* 8.1).⁴⁰ The fact that the concept of primal androgyny can be found in such a diversity of texts indicates that it had a certain amount of currency in various early Christian circles. It is thus at least conceivable that such a concept formed part of the conceptual context in which Mani and his early followers formulated their cosmogony.

Another, albeit ambiguous, piece of evidence which points to the importance of male-female pairs in early Manichaean discourse can be found in the Coptic *Psalm-Book*. According to “Bema Psalm” 223, the Father sent forth his “strong son” (ⲟⲩⲏⲣⲉ ⲛⲁⲭⲟⲣⲉ) to counter the dark invasion. The son, however, produces someone called “his virgin” (ⲧⲉⲉⲡⲓⲁⲣⲟⲉⲛⲟⲥ), who is, just like First Man, equipped with “five powers” (ⲧⲉ ⲛⲟⲩⲁⲙ) in order to battle with the forces of darkness (2Ps 10.6-9). Then the psalmist records how First Man (here called the “watcher” [ⲡⲓⲙⲁⲛⲓⲁⲓⲧⲉⲩ]), in an action reminiscent of the Third Messenger, reveals “his Maiden” to the dark powers, causing them to go mad with desire (2Ps 10.10-14).⁴¹ This idea—also attested in a recently discovered Manichaean text from Kellis⁴²—that it was a pair of beings who actually when out to meet the darkness may reflect some very early stratum of early Manichaean discourse in which the principal beings of each evocation were conceived of as androgynous pairs.⁴³ After all, if the demons created Adam and Eve based on the androgynous image of the Third Ambassador, then it should not be surprising that First Man, the Ambassador’s prototype, should manifest both male and female aspects while going into battle.

35 Even Cumont recognized that the Virgin of Light represented the feminine aspect of the Messenger (*Recherches I*, 64).

36 Cazelaïs, *Une interprétation chrétienne*, 123-124.

37 Kasser, *Papyrus Bodmer III*.

38 Wolf-Peter Funk (personal communication) to Cazelaïs, *Une interprétation chrétienne*, 123.

39 See also Epiphanius, *Panarion* 34.

40 Cazelaïs, “La masculofeminité d’Adam,” 174-188.

41 Reeves points out that “the ‘Maiden of Light’ frequently assumes the role occupied in some forms of the cosmogonical tradition by the ‘Third Messenger’” (“Manichaean Citations,” 280 n.73).

42 In this Greek text, a feminine being addressed as πόρνια (“lady”) is depicted as clothing herself in the Five Elements and going out to meet the powers of darkness. See Gardner and Worp, “Leaves from a Manichaean Codex,” 148-151.

43 A similar idea is found in a litany of divine powers found in passages from Mani’s *Living Gospel* from the *Synaxeis* codex (W.-P. Funk, personal communication).

Conclusions and Implications

In sum, then, my suggestion is that in the background of what seems to be a variety of conflicting or redundant cosmogonic details stands a “proto-structure” in which most of the primary actors from the cosmogony can be read, like a palimpsest, to have been (at some early stage) hypostatic representations of one primary divine triad. As such, I suggest that the basic “proto-structure” of Manichaeism cosmogony should be reconstructed as follows:

<i>Sequential pattern</i>	<i>Ontological pattern</i>
TRIAD 1 : 1 st Evocation 1.1) Father of Greatness 1.2) Mother of Life/Great Spirit 1.3) First Man / [Virgin?] 1-2-3-4-5 “sons”	TRIAD 1 1.1) Father of Greatness 1-2-3-4-5 qualities
TRIAD 2 : 2 nd Evocation 2.1) Beloved of Lights 2.2) Great Builder 2.3) Living Spirit 1-2-3-4-5 “sons”	1.2) Mother of Life / Great Spirit TRIAD 2 2.1) Beloved of Lights 2.2) Great Builder 2.3) Living Spirit 1-2-3-4-5 “sons”
TRIAD 3 : 3 rd Evocation 3.1) Third Messenger 3.2) Column of Glory / Perfect Man 3.3) Jesus the Splendour/Virgin of Light [1-2-3-4-5 qualities?] ⁴⁵	1.3) First Man TRIAD 3 3.1) Third Messenger 3.2) Column of Glory / Perfect Man 3.3) Jesus the Splendour/Virgin of Light [1-2-3-4-5 qualities?]

As can be seen, each triad forms a unity of three emanations with five aspects or qualities, although the nature of these five qualities falls outside this discussion. Moreover, each of these triads can be understood as a hypostatic expansion of one of the members of the first primal triad of 1) Father of Greatness, 2) Mother of Life/Great Spirit, and 3) First Man/Virgin. Thus, as was argued above, the second triad of 1) Beloved of Lights, 2) Great Builder, and 3) Living Spirit, can be read as a hypostatic expansion of Mother of Life/Great Spirit, while the third triad of 1) Third Messenger, 2) Column of Glory/Perfect Man, and 3) Jesus the Splendour/Virgin of Light can be similarly viewed as representing various hypostatic manifestations of First Man.

What we are dealing with here are not so much different beings as different *modalities* of the same being which “in the beginning” had three primary aspects. This provides further evidence that the root of the Manichaean system is in fact a Judeo-Christian conception of a triadic divinity, from which the rest of the cosmic drama was elaborated. Therefore, Manichaean theology seems to have been much more “trinitarian” than is often supposed and as such was essentially “Christian” in its original formulation. What’s more, Manichaean cosmogony provides additional attestation of the fact that a trinitarian concept of Father-Mother-Androgynous⁴⁴ Child influenced some early Christian circles of Late Antiquity.

Let me be clear in stating that my aim here is not to provide a framework in which all formulations of Manichaean theology ought to be fit. In fact, this model, if it existed at all, seems to have broken down rather quickly in the process of transmission and translation. Rather, I only wish to propose that certain

⁴⁴ In fact, the realization that, as Theodore bar Khonai’s account makes clear, Manichaeans viewed divine beings and their manifestations as androgynous is, in some ways, the key to this entire reconstruction. The concept of androgyny however does not seem to have been restricted to light beings. For instance, Theodore records that when the Messenger caused the Archons to expel their “Sin,” the moist part that fell to earth became a monstrous creature based on the image of the King of Darkness. What is interesting to note, however, is that one of Living Spirit’s sons, Adamas of Light, is sent to do battle with “her.”

idiosyncrasies⁴⁵ from some of the earliest Syriac and Coptic Manichaean sources point toward a triadic “proto-structure” that meshes well with what we know and are continuing to learn about the milieu out of which Manichaean concepts emerged, namely some form of Syriac Christianity from third-century Mesopotamia, heavily influenced by Judaeo-Christian concepts of trinity, feminine spirit, and divine androgyny.

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⁴⁵ Idiosyncrasies which somehow seem to have gone unnoticed or left unexplained. Even Lieu’s most recent article on “Manichaean *Technici Termini* in the *Liber Scholiorum* of Theodore bar Kōnī” makes no mention of these rich ambiguities and associations, in spite of the recognition that “Syriac terms as found in Theodore bar Kōnī are the fountain-head of a *particular* tradition of presentation of Manichaean myth” (p. 247, with emphasis added).

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