1 Enoch 73:5–8 is the first section in the Book of the Luminaries (1 En. 72–82) which gives specific information about the changing illumination of the moon. The initial verse in the chapter identifies 1 En. 73 as “a second law for the smaller luminary whose name is the moon” to distinguish it from the first law, the one for the sun, which can be read in 1 En. 72 (see v. 2). In vv. 2–3, the writer supplies information about the moon, including the statement: “Each month its emergence and setting change, and its days are like the days of the sun. When its light is evenly distributed (over its surface), it is one-seventh the light of the sun.” The system with which the writer works involves dividing the half of the moon facing the earth into fourteen parts, with one-fourteenth part of light added each day the moon waxes and one subtracted each day the moon wanes. One would expect, therefore, a simple listing of these fractions for a month or set of months; instead, the reader finds details about what appear to be only two consecutive days (more on this below) and a more complicated set of statements which have proved to be an exegetical challenge.

This essay has two parts. The first surveys the history of scholarship on these verses, while the second offers a critical text and interpretation influenced by information from the synchronistic calendar found in 4Q208–209 (4QEnastr°°) and related data from Mesopotamian astronomical texts.

1 Quotations of 1 Enoch, unless otherwise indicated, are from G.W.E. Nickelsburg and J.C. VanderKam, I Enoch: A New Translation (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).


I. History of Scholarship

The most important of the early commentaries on 1 Enoch was written by A. Dillmann, and his interpretation of 1 En. 73:5–8 in it has had a lasting influence on the field. Dillmann argued on the basis of v. 5 that the writer was speaking about one-half of the moon. He rendered the first four Ethiopic words in the verse as “Und die eine Hälfte davon ragt um ein Siebentheil hervor.” The reference to “one-fourteenth part of its light” at the end of the verse meant that the moon “ragt vor um 1/7 nämlich der halben, d.i. um 1/14 der ganzen Scheibe.” From this he drew the conclusion that wherever the text mentioned sevenths, it was speaking about half of the moon; when it referred to fourteenths, it intended the whole moon, though he thought the writer expressed this in a clumsy way. From v. 6, Dillmann inferred another and perhaps unexpected fraction. Verse 5, he believed, dealt with a day in a month that had fifteen days until full moon, but v. 6 presented details about a day in a month with only fourteen days from conjunction until full moon (a hollow month). As he understood it, v. 6 meant: “und wann er ein Siebentheil und die Hälfte (eines Siebentheils) von seinem Lichte, also 1 1/2 Siebentheile (aber nach dem halben Mond berechnet) Licht annimmt, so beträgt ein Licht (nach dem ganzen Mond berechnet) 1/7 + 7 und die Hälfte davon, d.i. ein 1/14 und 1/28 = 3/28.”

The idea that sevenths have to do with half the moon, fourteenths with all of the moon, and that the writer even divided the lunar surface into twenty-eighths became the standard way in which to read the text. In his commentary on 1 Enoch, R.H. Charles lent his considerable authority to Dillmann’s exegesis. In connection with v. 5, he wrote: “In this verse and the next the fractions are fractions of half the moon. Thus, 1/7th of it, i.e. of the half moon = 1/14th of whole moon, and 1/14th of half moon = 1/28th of whole moon.” He translated the first part of v. 5 as “And the one half of her goes forth by a seventh part”; the end of the verse he emended slightly by placing a conjunction between the two fractions: “with the exception of one-seventh part of it, (and)

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4 A. Dillmann, Das Buch Henoch (Leipzig: Vogel, 1853), 228.
5 Ibid. By half the moon he presumably meant the half visible from the earth.
6 Ibid. The relevant part of this verse reads in Dillmann’s edition: “wa-ba-elata yenašše xāsā be āyu xeda wa-manfaqa berhānu (Liber Henoch Aethiopic ad quinque codicum fidei editus [Leipzig: Vogel, 1851], 49 [it is 1 En. 74:6 in his edition]).