

Was the Tower of Babel Really Left Unfinished? Genesis 11:5 in Light of Hebrew Syntax, the Septuagint, and Jewish Reception

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Résumé. Selon une lecture séculaire du « récit de la tour de Babel » (Genèse 11, 1-9), encore largement adoptée par les exégètes, le texte évoque l'arrêt de la construction de la fameuse tour. De ce fait, beaucoup s'estiment contraints d'infléchir le sens du v. 5 en traduisant « la ville et la tour que les humains bâtissaient », alors que la syntaxe hébraïque conduirait à employer ici un plus-que-parfait. Selon ces chercheurs, le verset ne saurait indiquer que l'édification de la tour et de la cité est révolue, si c'est seulement plus tard que Dieu fait cesser ce processus (v. 8). Cet article défend une autre interprétation, très minoritaire jusqu'ici mais qui ne force pas la grammaire hébraïque et convient au contexte ; il faut comprendre au v. 5 : « Yhwh descendit voir la ville, et la tour que les humains avaient bâtie ». La proposition relative en fin de verset a pour seul antécédent « la tour » - comme l'avaient compris les traducteurs de la Septante et de la Vulgate. Ainsi, le v. 5 suppose que la tour est achevée, non le reste de la ville. De manière intéressante, la réception juive de ce passage ne présuppose pas toujours que la construction de cet édifice a été interrompue ; le Midrash Rabbah et le Midrash Tanhuma disent même le contraire.

1. An interrupted construction?

The most famous representations of the tower of Babel are probably the paintings of it made by Pieter Bruegel in 1563 and 1568, now to be seen in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, respectively.¹ Among the many fascinating aspects of the first painting features the upper half of the tower, still under construction, with scaffolding visible in several places. The inner part of the building consists

¹ Another painting of the tower, made earlier, is lost.

of many concentric layers; interestingly, Bruegel painted them in shades of red, whereas the external walls of the tower are off-white to yellow. This contrast reinforces the overall impression of an unfinished building. In addition, Bruegel painted a number of workers on every floor of the tower: the construction is still ongoing. The same holds true for the 1568 painting, although the tower now looks more developed, with many more floors completed. The website of the museum where the latter painting is housed comments: "In Bruegel's depiction of 'The Tower of Babel', God's punishment has not yet been enacted: the bricks are still being carried up the tower and the harbour below is a hive of activity."² This remark is, of course, inspired by the narrative in Gen 11:1-9, especially v. 8: "So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city." (NRSV). It is widely accepted that Yhwh's reaction forced the humans to cease constructing the buildings of the city, and *in particular* the tower, which had come to the fore in v. 4 and looked like a powerful symbol of their hubris.

The most attentive scholars have noticed that this mention of an interruption of the building of the city and, more specifically, of the tower, might help in dating the narrative. Indeed, the cuneiform sources concerning the ziggurat of Babylon document a number of stages in its history, and it turns out that an important construction project concerning it was interrupted for a long time in the 7th century BCE. As noted by A. George, "following Sennacherib's sack of Babylon the tower took nearly a century to rebuild, from ca 680 ca 590, and in doing so was a drain on the resources of four of the most powerful rulers in Antiquity."³ Indeed, Esarhaddon decided to restore the tower and notably to cover it in a baked-brick mantle⁴ (or to expand an already-existing baked-brick mantle), but he was unable to complete this project, as was also his suc-

² <https://www.boijmans.nl/en/collection/in-depth/bruegel-s-tower-of-babel>, retrieved 21 March 2021.

³ A. George, "The Tower of Babel: Archaeology, History and Cuneiform Texts," *AfO* 51 (2005-6): 75-95, esp. 86.

⁴ Excavations of the tower have uncovered three components: a mud-brick core, a mud-brick mantle, and a baked-brick mantle.

cessor, Ashurbanipal; Nabopolassar, the founder of the Neo-Babylonian empire, took on the work, but it is only Nebuchadnezzar II who really finished it.⁵ This information is regarded by some exegetes as an important clue for dating at least the core of Gen 11:1-9. Thus, in his recent and excellent commentary, David Carr argues that this kernel comes from the Neo-Assyrian period, notably because

[the Neo-Assyrian period] is the period in which the famous tower in Babylon started to be covered with fired bricks, but was left unfinished for a period of decades. In ending with a still unfinished (Gen 11:8), asphalt and fired brick construction (Gen 11:3) at Babylon, the Gen 11:1-9 story seems to presuppose independent knowledge of the city as it stood during the Neo-Assyrian period, before the Neo-Babylonian rulers completed the fired-brick reconstruction begun (but not completed) by Esarhaddon.⁶

2. Another interpretation

However, does the text really refer to a time when the building of the ziggurat was interrupted? Two verses are relevant in this regard. First, v. 8 claims that “they left off building the city.” The tower is not even mentioned here. Most scholars reason that ceasing building the city entails stopping the construction of all the buildings it contains, including the tower, but this would concern the latter if, and only if, it had not been completed beforehand. But precisely, we shall see that the completion of the building of the tower is implied by v. 5:

וירד יהוה לראות את העיר ואת המגדל אשר בנו בני האדם

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. (NRSV)

⁵ George, “The Tower of Babel,” 79-86.

⁶ D. M. Carr, *Genesis 1-11* (IECOT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021), 329.

There is some hesitation, in modern English translations, as to the way the verb בָּנוּ should be rendered in this verse. Some prefer a pluperfect (“had built”; NRSV, JPS), while others use an imperfect (“were building”; NIV). However, the syntax of the verbal system in Classical Biblical Hebrew is unambiguous: it clearly indicates that we should use a pluperfect. Indeed, the use of a *qatal* form in the relative clause indicates anteriority with regard to the time line of the narrative.⁷ In other words, the clause אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם refers to a time prior to the time referred to by the previous verb, וַיֵּרֶד. So the versions that, like JPS and NRSV, read, in substance, “Yhwh came down to see (...) that the humans had built”, are the sole to correctly render the meaning of the Hebrew. This is also what is found in a number of exegetical commentaries, even though they do not address the matter.⁸

Some scholars have perceived this but, because they are influenced by (their interpretation of) v. 8, they bend the meaning of v. 5 even though they translate it correctly. Thus, Šanda renders v. 5: “The Lord came down to look at the city and tower that man had built,” but he comments: “Thus far. Verse 8 shows that the project remained uncompleted.”⁹ Similarly, Fischer’s translation is: “Und JHWH stieg herunter, zu sehen die Stadt und den Turm, den die Menschenkinder gebaut hatten.” But he comments: “Das Perfekt von בָּנוּ ‘gebaut hatten’ ist nicht als gelungener Abschluss, Vollendung des Vorhabens zu verstehen, sondern von V 8 her als das

⁷ J. Joosten, *The Verbal System of Biblical Hebrew: A New Synthesis Elaborated on the Basis of Classical Prose* (Jerusalem Biblical Studies 10; Jerusalem: Simor, 2012), 213-14, with Gen 11:5 taken as an illustration. See also GKC §106f; IBHS § 30.5.2. The same obtains “almost always” in Late Biblical Hebrew: O. Cohen, *The Verbal Tense System in Late Biblical Hebrew Prose* (HSM 63; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns), 51.

⁸ E.g. G. Von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose: Genesis, Kapitel 1-12,9* (ATD 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), 112; G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 233; V. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 349. C. Westermann’s original commentary, in German, has “den die Menschen bauten” (*Genesis*, vol. 1. *Genesis 1-11* [BKAT I/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974], 710), while the English translation has “had built” (*Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994], 533).

⁹ A. Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige*, vol. 2: *Das zweite Buch der Könige* (Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament 9; Münster: Aschendorff, 1912), 83.

bis dahin erreichte, unvollständige Stadium.”¹⁰ It may be for the same reason that some Bible translators write “were building,” and why the NET Bible (2nd edition) goes so far as to render the clause: “that the people had started building.”¹¹ Even a grammarian like B. K. Waltke has recourse to a strained argument to defend the translation “were building”: “the project is incomplete, as v. 8 indicates. Nevertheless, as much as they have built is represented as complete through the literal Hebrew here: ‘they built’.”¹²

Yet there is no reason to force v. 5 to mean what it does not mean. Commentators have overlooked the fact that while the antecedent of the relative clause obviously includes “the tower,” it does not necessarily include “the city.” To put it another way, a possible understanding would be the following: “Yhwh came down to see the city, and the tower that the men had built.” Here, the comma is used to show that only “the city” is the antecedent of the relative clause; that is, in Hebrew, only המגדל is the antecedent of אשר בנו בני האדם. In Biblical Hebrew, the antecedent of a relative clause sometimes only consists in the last item in a list.¹³

In fact, taken in isolation from its context, the sentence is ambiguous; grammatically, the antecedent could also be אתהעיר ואת המגדל. The Masoretic accentuation (with the *atnah* in המגדל) seems to favor the latter understanding,¹⁴ but it already represents an *interpretation* of the consonantal text, which may or may not be cor-

¹⁰ G. Fischer, *Genesis 1-11* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2018), 597, 618.

¹¹ The same reasoning is explicit in W. D. Reymann, E. McG. Fry and R. Péterson, *La Genèse: Manuel du traducteur: Commentaire linguistique et exégétique du traducteur*, *1.1-25-18 (Villiers-le-Bel: Bibli’o, 2005), 281: they note that the pluperfect « avaient bâti » is possible, but they translate « bâtissaient » in view of v. 8.

¹² B. K. Waltke, with C. J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 180.

¹³ For instance, in Gen 18:8, the relative clause אשר עשה (“that he had prepared”, lit. “made”) is preceded by a list: “curds and milk and the calf” (וחלב וכן הבקר חמאה). However, it is clear that only “the calf” constitutes the antecedent of the relative clause, because this is the only thing that can be said to have been “prepared” (lit. “made”) by Abraham, as we know thanks to the previous verse (more precisely, Abraham had it prepared by a servant).

¹⁴ I thank David Marcus for pointing this out to me. See, for instance, Jer 27:8-9 for similar cases.

rect. If we understand בּנו as a pluperfect, as is required by the syntax here, then this interpretation implies that not only the tower, but also the city, was already completed at the time referred to in v. 5, and thus before God's intervention, which is contradictory with v. 8. Therefore, the syntax, combined to the context, implies that the antecedent of the relative clause in v. 5 does not include העיר. The Babylonians have begun building their city, and they even have completed the tower, when Yhwh comes down (v. 5). Then, in v. 8, Yhwh makes them cease building the city, that is, all the construction work that is still ongoing – which cannot include the tower, because it was already finished at the time referred to by v. 5.¹⁵

Interestingly, the Septuagint, the Old Latin (which translates the LXX) and the Vulgate all presuppose that the antecedent of the relative clause only includes “the tower.” The translator of the Septuagint used the relative pronoun ὃν in the sentence: καὶ κατέβη κύριος ἰδεῖν τὴν πόλιν καὶ τὸν πύργον, ὃν ᾠκοδόμησαν οἱ υἱοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Accordingly, the antecedent of the relative clause is merely τὸν πύργον.¹⁶ Both the Old Latin and the Vulgate use here the relative pronoun *quam*, which refers back to *turrem* only: *descendit dominus videre civitatem et turrem quam aedificaverunt filii hominum* (Old Latin);¹⁷ *descendit autem Dominus ut videret civitatem et turrem quam aedificabant filii Adam* (Vulgate).

¹⁵ Joosten wrote about v. 5: “before the LORD came down, the tower had been built” (*The Verbal System*, 214).

¹⁶ I am most grateful to my wife, Sarah, for pointing this out to me. Theoretically, one could speculate that the antecedent includes τὴν πόλιν and thus has two components (τὴν πόλιν and τὸν πύργον) but that it is a case of agreement of the relative pronoun with the nearest antecedent. Yet this is unlikely here: the two expressions τὴν πόλιν and καὶ τὸν πύργον appear in immediate succession; it is not a situation where, for instance, some part of the antecedent is separated from the rest by a parenthetical clause, so that only the last part of would be kept in mind when the relative pronoun occurs. In other words, there is no reason that would have prompted the author of this verse to make the relative pronoun agree (in number and in genre) with the nearest antecedent only. According to the most natural reading of this Greek sentence, only the tower is the antecedent of the relative clause. The same remark applies to the Latin versions.

¹⁷ B. Fischer, *Vetus latina die Reste der altlateinischen Bibel*. 2. Genesis (Freiburg: Herder, 1951), 143. Note that the witnesses of the Old Latin disagree about the last

The translational evidence concerning the verb is also interesting.¹⁸ The Hebrew בָּנוּ is rendered by an imperfect (*aedificabant*) in the Vulgate,¹⁹ but by an aorist (ᾠκοδόμησαν) in the LXX. Admittedly, the aorist can be the equivalent of an imperfect, as in the French translation in the series *La Bible d'Alexandrie* (“*qu’édifiaient*”).²⁰ But Muraoka notes that aorist is often used as a pluperfect in the LXX, especially in relative clauses,²¹ hence the NETS translation: “had built”. This understanding of ᾠκοδόμησαν is, in fact, presupposed by the reading *aedificaverant* (pluperfect) in some witnesses of the Old Latin, and perhaps also by the reading *aedificaverunt* (perfect), although *aedificabant* (imperfect) is also attested.²² At the very least, it is possible that the Septuagint means in v. 5: “...the city, and the tower that the men had built.”

That being said, the Septuagint contains a plus in v. 8, compared to MT: καὶ ἐπαύσαντο οἰκοδομοῦντες τὴν πόλιν καὶ τὸν πύργον: “and they ceased to build the city and the tower.” The Hebrew equivalent of the same plus (וְאֵת הַמִּגְדָּל) appears in the Samaritan Pentateuch.²³ This plus is clearly an addition due to an assimilation to the double expression found in v. 5 (“the city and the tower”),²⁴ ~~and also, in reverse order, in v. 4 (“the tower and the city”).~~ But it implies that the tower was still under construction. As a result, for the Greek text to be logically consistent, the aorist in v. 5 must have the value of an imperfect. The question is whether we should expect such a consistency. And what makes it uncertain is the fact

verb; below I mention a couple of variant readings. I thank my colleague Régis Burnet for his help in dealing with the Latin versions.

¹⁸ Among the other ancient versions, the targumim (Onqelos, Pseudo-Jonathan and Neofiti) use a Peal perfect (בָּנוּ), while the Peshitta has a participle (בִּנְיָ).

¹⁹ Although one manuscript of the Vulgate has the pluperfect, *edificaverant*: H. Quentin, *Biblia sacra iuxta latinam vulgatam versionem. I. Librum genesis* (Rome: Typis polygotitis vaticanis, 1926), 182.

²⁰ M. Harl, *La Genèse* (BA 1; Paris: Cerf, 1994), 148. A note (p. 149) adds that in view of v. 6 and 8, the aorist here is inchoative.

²¹ T. Muraoka, *A Syntax of Septuagint Greek* (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 271-2.

²² Fischer, *Vetus Latina*, 143.

²³ *The Samaritan Pentateuch: A Critical editio maior*, vol. 1: Genesis, edited by S. Schorch (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2021), 65.

²⁴ As noted by A. Tal, *Genesis* (BHQ 1; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 2015), 26.

that other translations do not exhibit it: some Old Latin witnesses have a pluperfect in v. 5, and yet say in v. 8 that the construction of both the city and the tower is interrupted. The same holds true for the NETS translation. Below, we shall see that the same tension is present in the Book of Jubilees. In the end, the least that can be said is that the aorist in the Septuagint of v. 5 is equivocal.

3. Contextual remarks

Some modern readers may be discountenanced by the interpretation defended in this article because they believe that the narrative of Gen 11:1-9 is first of all about the tower: it would be surprising if the interruption of its construction were not at the center of the stage. But this is a presupposition based on tradition, not on the text itself. Only a widespread and well-established interpretational habit has led us to entitle this passage: “The tower of Babel” in many Bible editions and commentaries. In reality, the text is centered on the city of Babylon,²⁵ as is indicated by the fact that the interruption of the building of the city is mentioned in v. 8, whereas the tower is not even mentioned, and by the “popular” etymology at the end of the narrative (v. 9), which concerns the name of the city. In addition, the action taken by Yhwh results in the scattering of the people “over all the face of the earth:” the big picture is not about the erection of a big tower, but about the humans’ resistance to the possibility of being scattered over the earth:²⁶ this was, after all, the motivation they explicitly mentioned behind their building project (v. 4).

²⁵ As noted by C. Uehlinger, *Weltreich und “eine Rede”: Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerzählung (Gen 11,1-9)* (OBO 101; Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Freiburg/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 372.

²⁶ It could also be observed that the meaning of the Hebrew verb בָּנָה is flexible. In some verses, it means “do some construction work”, not necessarily “build from scratch”; this is probably the case in verses mentioning the construction of cities which already existed previously (see e.g. 1 Kgs 9:15). So perhaps we could imagine that Gen 11:5 means: “the city and the tower where men had done some construction work”? Even so, that would not change the problem, because the

As a matter of fact, the interpretation of v. 5 that is defended here allows us to better understand two details in the text. First, it is now evident why v. 8 does not mention the tower, a fact that has long proved surprising to scholars who noticed that the text mentions the city *and* the tower twice (in v. 4 and 5), and then only the city (v. 8); this was one of the reasons that led some commentators to divide the text into two sources, one concerning the city, the other about the tower.²⁷ In reality, the tower cannot be mentioned in v. 8 alongside the city because it was already completed according to v. 5; only the city, that is, the rest of the buildings under construction in Babylon, can be mentioned.

The second detail is more subtle, it concerns the way Yhwh reacts to what he has just seen by saying: “this is (only) the beginning of their doing!” (וְזֶה הַחֵלֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת). The implicit referent of the demonstrative *זֶה* could theoretically encompass all the buildings that are already visible in Babylon (whether they are finished or not). But if the interpretation defended here is correct, what Yhwh has in mind (and in front of him) is more probably the recently-completed tower of Babel, which constitutes the first great achievement of the Babylonians. So in v. 5, Yhwh comes down to see the city in general, and the tower in particular, since it is already achieved. While this interpretation is not absolutely required by the text, Yhwh’s reaction makes better sense if the tower is already finished.²⁸

4. A few words on the Jewish reception

Finally, it is worth noting that the ancient Jewish reception of the text is far from unanimous in assuming that the construction of

relative clause still refers to something that is over. Why would the narrator mention the building work as a thing of the past when the Lord comes down, if, in reality, it only ceases later, at the time referred to in v. 8?

²⁷ H. Gunkel, *Genesis*, trad. M. E. Biddle (Mercier Library of Biblical Studies; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 94-99.

²⁸ It is also worth noting that the correct interpretation of v. 5 only becomes clear when the reader reaches v. 8. Before that, v. 5 could be read in two ways, it is ambiguous. Could it be a hint that the redactor(s) of the passage counted on the fact that this narrative is meant to be read and read over again?

the tower was interrupted; on the contrary, some interpreters assume or claim that it was completed. I will only mention very few examples, to illustrate four different situations.

First, some literary works unambiguously state that the men ceased to build both the city and the tower. This is the case, for instance, in Jubilees (10:24):

And the Lord went down and we went down with him. And we saw the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And He mixed up their tongues, and, therefore, one did not hear another's word. And so they ceased to build the city and the tower.²⁹

Like the Septuagint, Jubilees has the plus “and the tower” in the last sentence, compared to Gen 11:8 in the MT. As a result, the text explicitly says that the building of tower was interrupted.³⁰ In passing, let us note that in the sentence paraphrasing Gen 11:5, which is the second sentence in the quotation above, the most natural rendering of the last verb is the pluperfect “had built”, although it creates a tension within the narrative.³¹

The *Book of Biblical Antiquities* (*Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*), written not long after the fall of the Second Temple, is not explicit but, at least in the Latin version we possess of it, its phrasing presupposes that the tower was unfinished:

When the people inhabiting the earth *had begun to build the tower*, God divided up their languages and changed their appearances, and

²⁹ J. L. Kugel, “Jubilees”, in *Outside the Bible: Ancient Jewish Writings Related to Scripture*, ed. L. H. Feldman, J. L. Kugel, and L. H. Schiffman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 332.

³⁰ For other aspects of this episode in Jubilees, see for instance P. M. Sherman, *Babel's Tower Translated: Genesis 11 and Ancient Jewish Interpretation* (Leiden/Boston : Brill, 2013), 97-120.

³¹ Here the Ethiopic *za-ḥanaṣu* uses the relative pronoun followed by a verb which, in such a relative clause, is naturally translated by a pluperfect: A. Dillmann, *Ethiopic Grammar*, 2nd edition, revised by C. Bezold, translated by J. Crichton (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 167-168 (§88). For a critical edition of the Ethiopic version of Jubilees, see *The Book of Jubilees, edited and translated by J. C. Vanderkam*, 2 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 1989).

so they did not recognize each other nor did they understand each other's language. And so, when the builders would order their assistants to bring bricks, those would bring water; and if they requested water, they would bring straw. Thus, their plan was broken, and they stopped building the city.³²

In the first sentence, the inchoative verbal form “had begun to build” (*initiassent edificare*)³³ is immediately followed by God's intervention and the description of the chaos that results from it, which strongly suggests that the tower is not regarded as completed. Admittedly, the last sentence quoted above only mentions the end of the building of the city, but this is simply due to the fact that it paraphrases Gen 11:8.

Second, Philo of Alexandria also defends the notion that the tower was left unfinished, but it is worth noting that he could not do it on the basis of the words of the text. In fact, in *De confusione linguarum*, he notices that the grammar of v. 5 points to a past event. As a result, in his view, the text contains a paradox: it claims that the Babylonians completed the building of the city and the tower (according to v. 5), whereas in reality, they did not (according to v. 8). Interestingly, he felt it necessary to prove that the building work had been achieved, and to that effect, he had recourse to two arguments: first, it is unthinkable that something erected on earth could touch the heavens; second, even if they had been able to do so, the builders would have been consumed by the ether.³⁴ The very fact that he could not base his reasoning on the text, but needed to use “scientific” arguments, is, again, telling.

Third, some other works do not contain any hint that the tower was left unfinished. This is the case in the story told by Josephus in the *Jewish Antiquities* (Ant I.118):

³² H. Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), vol. 1, 101 (emphasis mine).

³³ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁴ Philo, *De confusione linguarum: Introduction, traduction et notes par J. G. Kahn* (Paris: Cerf, 1963), 129-31 (§155-58). For a discussion, see Sherman, *Babel's Tower Translated*, 266-68.

And they built a tower omitting nothing of zeal nor showing hesitancy in doing their work. And, owing to the great number of laborers, it reached a height more swiftly than anyone might have expected. However, its thickness was so strong that its height appeared smaller to those who saw it. It was built of baked brick bound together with bitumen, in order that it might not collapse. Seeing them thus out of their mind, God decided not to obliterate them utterly because they had not even been brought to their senses by those who had first perished, but he cast them in factional strife by causing them to speak various languages and causing them not to understand themselves owing to the variety of languages.³⁵

No mention is made of an interruption of the building; in fact, reading Josephus's narrative without any preconception rather gives the impression that the tower was completed.

Fourth, and most interestingly, some later works mention the view, held by some sages, that the tower was completed. Thus we read in *Genesis Rabbah* (dated about the 5th century CE):

R. Judan said: The tower they built, but they did not build the city. An objection is raised: But it is written: *And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower* (v. 5)? Read what follows, he replied: *And they left off to build the city* (v. 8), the tower, however, not being mentioned. R. Hiyya ben Abba said: "A third of this tower which they built sank [into the earth], a third was burnt, while a third is still standing."³⁶

The latter sentence by Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba is interesting, because it would be quite strange to talk about the three thirds of an unfinished tower. But Rabbi Judan's assertion is explicit and clear. It is based on the absence of the mention of the tower in v. 8.

³⁵ *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, edited by S. Mason, vol. 3: *Judean Antiquities 1-4: Translation and Commentary* by L. H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 41.

³⁶ *Midrash Rabbah translated into English*, edited by H. Freedman and M. Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1939), vol. 1, 307.

*Midrash Tanhuma*³⁷ should also be noted. Like *Genesis Rabbah*, it mentions Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba's description of the three thirds of the tower. But the most striking statement is the following:

“Had He not permitted them to build the tower, they would have claimed: ‘If we had built the tower, we would have ascended and waged war against Him.’ Therefore, He allowed them to erect the tower. After that, He looked down upon them and scattered them (...)”³⁸

Here the very logic of the argument requires that the tower was completed: if its construction had been interrupted, then the humans could still object: “If we had built the tower entirely, we would have ascended and waged war against Him.” While the notion that the tower was finished is not based here on the words of the biblical text but on another rationale, it proves that at least some Jewish interpreters regarded the tower of Babel as completed.

Before closing this section, it is interesting to note that the same idea is also found in the Samaritan tradition. The *Asatir*, which contains midrashim on the Torah, is dated to the 10th or 11th century CE, although Stadel tentatively dates the Babel pericope it contains from the 6th or 7th century CE.³⁹ The Genesis story is re-written in such a way that the Babylonians build a “high building”

³⁷ It is often dated to the 9th century CE, although some would prefer a date closer to the middle of the 1st millenium CE for its first redaction; see H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. M. Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 305-6.

³⁸ *Midrash Tanhuma*, Noach, Siman 18. Translation by S. A. Berman, available on the website Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanhuma%2C_Noach.18 retrieved 22 March 2021.

³⁹ Ch. Stadel, “The Story of the Tower of Babel in the Samaritan Book *Asatir* as a Historical Midrash on the Samaritan Revolts of the Sixth Century C.E.,” *JAOS* 135 (2015), 189-207. For a critical edition, French translation, and philological analysis, see Ch. Bonnard, *Asfār Asāṭīr, le “Livre des Légendes”, une réécriture araméenne du Pentateuque samaritain : présentation, édition critique, traduction et commentaire philologique, commentaire comparatif* (PhD dissertation; Strasbourg: Université de Strasbourg, 2015), which can be downloaded at <https://scanr.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/publication/these2015STRAK014>. I am most grateful to Mary-

on a mountain, and they “set a beacon upon it”; the text explicitly says: “they finished building (וּקֶצַע לַמִּבְנֵי), but the building was shattered.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

Exegetes have long been torn between two constraints: a grammatical one in v. 5, which should lead to the translation “had built;” a contextual one, stemming from v. 8, which implies that the construction of the city is still ongoing at the time referred to in that verse. Some commentators have felt a tension between these two constraints, and their solution has been to bend the meaning of v. 5. However, a simpler option exists, that gives the last verb of v. 5 its full force while not introducing a tension with v. 8: to limit the referent of the relative clause in v. 5 to the tower, and thus to understand: “The Lord came down to see the city, and the tower that the men had built.”

This has implications for the interpretation of this narrative. Thus, the main focus is not on the tower but on the city, which confirms what some exegetes have already noted. The tower is briefly mentioned as a striking illustration of the projects that the Babylonians could continue achieving if Yhwh did not intervene; it is most likely the tower that the latter alludes to when he says: “this is only the beginning of their doing” (v. 6). In addition, it now seems less pertinent, in order to date the text, to look for a period in the history of the tower when its construction was interrupted. The most natural reading of the text would rather lead us to look for a time when a more general problem in the city, related to building work, happened. It is not easy to see what this could correspond to in the history of Babylon, and perhaps it would be wiser to accept the simple fact that the text speaks only in very general terms.

Gabrielle Roth-Mouthon for pointing out this Samaritan tradition about the tower of Babel, and for providing me these bibliographical references.

⁴⁰ Translation from Stadel, *The Story of the Tower of Babel*, 191. See also Bonnard’s critical edition, and his translation : “Ils achevèrent la construction puis l’édifice fut pulvérisé.” (*Asfār Asāṭir, le “Livre des Légendes”*, 200).

The interpretation of Gen 11:5 defended here may lead us, in turn, to look at Bruegel's paintings in another way: the little men who are represented building the tower are not working in vain, they will be able to finish it. That said, they will soon have to leave the city, and this time, Hebrew grammar cannot help them.