

EXEGETICAL BRIEF:  
 Matthew 11:12  
 Heaven's Forceful Kingdom and  
 Earth's Violent Men

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**T**his sentence in the middle of Jesus' praise of John the Baptist has challenged interpreters from antiquity.<sup>1</sup> Scroll through the translations available to you and you will see that two thousand years of debate have not in any way produced a consensus as to what Jesus meant when he said:

ἀπό δέ τῶν ἡμερῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ ἕως ἄρτι ἡ  
 βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν βιάζεται καὶ βιασταὶ ἀρπάζουσιν αὐτήν.

Review the efforts of the translations we have been evaluating in our circles:

*NIV2011* From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.

*NIV1984* From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

*Holman Christian Standard Bible* From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been suffering violence, and the violent have been seizing it by force.

*English Standard Version* From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

What makes this verse challenging is not a host of variants. There are no variants. Before we get into the actual details of what makes this verse challenging, remember the immediate context of Matthew, chapter 11. Herod the tetrarch had incarcerated John the Baptist. When John had heard how Jesus was conducting his ministry, he was compelled to send a couple of his own disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the One who is to come" (Mt 11:3)? Not an unreasonable question from

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey A. Gibbs' commentary on Matthew's Gospel includes a two and a half page excursus on the history of the interpretation on this verse. *Matthew 11:2–20:34. Concordia Commentary*, St. Louis: CPH, 2010, p 569-571.

a man who had been waiting for upwards of a year in this prison for his more powerful Messiah to start laying his ax to some roots (Mt 3:10-11). Jesus' reply directs John's disciples if not also John to the miracles and message of our Savior as described in Old Testament prophecies. After these disciples had departed, Jesus then turned to the crowd before him to describe the importance of this prophet, John. John was not a swaying reed or a pampered palace dweller. He was a prophet about whom prophecies were proclaimed. He was the prophet who became the hinge between the Old Testament preparations and the New Testament fulfillments though he himself would not live to see how Jesus would fulfill these promises. This is why Jesus said that as great as John was, even the very least of those who would see and understand how Jesus would complete his New Testament mission would be "greater" than John in terms of what they grasped about God's new order under Christ.

Now our verse. What was Jesus describing with the words, "From the days of John the Baptist until now?" We can paraphrase Jesus this way: "Do you remember how you ran out into the wilderness to see this prophet dressed in camel's hair and to hear his bold sermons that prepared you for me and the nearing kingdom? Ever since those early days of John's ministry right up to today . . ."

Now comes the first challenge: "Ever since those early days of John's ministry right up to today, the kingdom of heaven βιάζεται . . ." What does βιάζεται mean? It could be either a middle or a passive. Though BAG says that this verb appears "nearly always as a middle deponent,"<sup>2</sup> it does appear often enough in the passive voice to lead most translations (AV, NAS, BECK, RSV, ESV, KJV, et. al.) to render this verb as a passive.

As a middle deponent, our verb would be translated "the kingdom of heaven exercises force or violence." Hendriksen likes, "[the kingdom] has been pressing forward vigorously, forcefully." NIV1984 opted for the middle but NIV2011 went with the passive.

As a passive, βιάζεται would be translated "[the kingdom of heaven] is being attacked with violence or suffering violence." The verb's meaning does not have to be negative. Translating this verb as a theological passive would produce "[the kingdom of heaven] is being forcefully advanced [by God]."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, 140.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski determined that it did not matter whether the verb was in the middle voice or in the passive voice: "The meaning is the same: The kingdom 'is brought with force' or 'presses forward forcefully.'"

What does βιασται mean? Before we answer that specific question, notice first that this is the fourth word in this verse that begins with β. Jesus seems to be using alliteration to bring attention to his point. BAG tells us that this New Testament hapax is always used in a negative sense in the few times it appears in Greek literature. The word describes a violent person. Here, violent persons. In spite of how this word seems to be used, many translators and commentators want to infuse this word with a positive meaning *a la* NIV1984: “bold, daring, forceful men.”

Finally, there is ἀρπάζουσιν. BAG offers only negative meanings for this word, like “steal, take away forcefully” except in connection with our verse where it suggests “seize or claim for oneself” (p 108).<sup>4</sup>

There are three main options for interpreting this verse. Variations are of course legion but consider three options:

### Option One:

A translation may view βιάζεται, βιασται, and ἀρπάζουσιν with inherently negative meanings expressing negative concepts. This approach considers βιάζεται a passive. This is how NIV2011 treats our verse.

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.<sup>5</sup>

This option emphasizes that violent men are doing violence to the kingdom and are (trying) to steal it away presumably from Jesus.

The index to the American Edition of *Luther's Works* list seventeen references to Matthew 11:12. By my count, two of these references show Luther holding to this translation and interpretation. In his sermons on the Gospel of John (1537), Luther mentions the mighty and learned who, “although they can see here that God chooses the lowly first, they would have taken the kingdom of Christ by force and monopolized it.”<sup>6</sup> In his commentary on Galatians (1535), Luther states that those who rely on good works “deny faith and try to bless themselves by their own works, that is, to justify themselves . . . and to

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<sup>4</sup>This may be an example of history determining meaning rather than usage determining meaning. That is to say, I wonder whether BAG is showing respect for the history of the interpretation of this verse (cf. Gibbs' excursus) and how others have interpreted this verse rather than sticking to how ἀρπάζουσιν is used in the NT and in the papyri, etc.

<sup>5</sup>Also ASV, CEV, CEB, NASB, KJV.

<sup>6</sup>Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 1-4*, Volume 22, AE. St. Louis: CPH 1995, 191.

capture heaven by force—which is to deny God and to set oneself up in place of God.”<sup>7</sup>

### Option Two:

A translation may view βιάζεται, βιασταί, and ἀρπάζουσιν as used in this verse with positive meanings expressing positive concepts. We see this approach in the NIV1984:

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.

Lenski takes this approach: “The energy and the force with which the kingdom comes (or is brought) instills a similar energy and force in those whom the kingdom wins for itself.”

Hendriksen suggests that Jesus wants to say that the kingdom “has been pressing forward vigorously, forcefully” (as seen by Jesus’ miracles and conversions). Though many resist, “vigorous or forceful men, people who dare to break away from faulty human tradition” are taking possession of the kingdom.

Ylvisaker concludes his treatment of this verse with this description of these forceful men: “They have the will to be saved.”

This version puts forward two distinct and separate ideas: the first half of the verse describes what the kingdom is doing under Jesus and John and the second half describes how some people, namely the forceful ones, are reacting to the forcefully advancing kingdom.

In fifteen of his seventeen references to Matthew 11:12, Luther prefers this interpretation. We see this interpretation in Luther both in his early writings as well as his later writings. For example, in his Romans commentary of 1516, he follows his quote of our verse with this observation: “For prayer in my opinion is a constant violent action of the spirit as it is lifted up to God, as a ship is driven upward against the power of the storm.”<sup>8</sup> In his “Sermon on the Worthy Reception of the Sacrament” (1521) Luther commented that, “The people (in the day of John the Baptist) longed so for the kingdom of God and its help that they immediately and forcefully pressed toward it and seized it . . . God loves such guests (at the Lord’s Table).”<sup>9</sup> Then in his Genesis commentary of about 1542 Luther describes the “struggle of the godly” carried out by “the men of vio-

<sup>7</sup>Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Galatians 1-4*, Volume 26, AE. St. Louis: CPH 1995, 257.

<sup>8</sup>Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Romans*, Volume 25, AE. St. Louis: CPH 1995, 460.

<sup>9</sup>Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works: Devotional Writings I*, Volume 42, AE. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1969, 176.

lence who take the kingdom by force” with “the great fervency and power of the Spirit in weakness.”<sup>10</sup>

This option would also relate well to the only other use of βιάζεται in the New Testament. Though not a parallel passage per se<sup>11</sup>, Luke, in a pericope in which Jesus is rebuking Pharisees, writes:

“The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it (καὶ πᾶς εἰς αὐτὴν βιάζεται).<sup>12</sup>

The root, form, and tense are the same. Though there may be options as to interpretations of this verse, the translations treat βιάζεται as a middle. An interesting exception to this is in HCSB’s translation. I say interesting because it seems that the translators are going out of their way to sound Lutheran.

“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then, the good news of the kingdom of God has been proclaimed, and everyone is strongly urged to enter it.<sup>13</sup>

### Option Three:

A translation may view βιάζεται as a middle deponent expressing a positive meaning: “The kingdom of heaven is advancing powerfully” and even though the same root is used in the same verse, βιασταὶ (and also ἀρπάζουσιν) could be translated with the negative meaning “violent men” who are (trying to) steal away with the kingdom of heaven. The New Living Translation illustrates this approach:

And from the time John the Baptist began preaching until now, the Kingdom of Heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people are attacking it.<sup>14</sup>

Carson acknowledges that though these two words share a common root (βία = force, violence) they are used in our verse with “a different or even contradictory sense.”<sup>15</sup> This is Carson’s definition of the figure

<sup>10</sup>Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Genesis 31-37*, Volume 6, AE. St. Louis: CPH 1995, 110.

<sup>11</sup>Luke 16:16 takes place after the execution of John the Baptist. Obviously our verse takes place before this event.

<sup>12</sup>*The New International Version*. 2011 (Lk 16:16). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. All quotations of Scripture in this paper will be from this version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>13</sup>*The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version*. 2009 (Lk 16:16). Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers.

<sup>14</sup>Tyndale House Publishers. (2007). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (3rd ed.) (Mt 11:12). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>15</sup>Carson, D. A. Matthew. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol 8., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, 267.

of speech called an antanaclasis.<sup>16</sup> Carson wants to take βιάζεται as a middle deponent because this would be its “most likely voice” and to translate βιασταὶ and ἀρπάζουσιν with their “normal” negative meanings. This approach produces a translation like this: the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing and violent men are (trying to) snatch it away. Adding the conative idea (trying to) communicates the fact that though violent men might try to snatch God’s kingdom away, they could not actually succeed. Now the meaning of καὶ brings two very different phrases together and would therefore convey the idea of “and at the same time. . .”

Let us revisit the alliteration with the recurring β sound. The alliteration might draw attention to the fact that two words with the same root are in this verse used in different senses. Here, Matthew may be drawing attention to the significance of Jesus’ comments regarding John the Baptist and the imminence of the kingdom that Jesus was about to bring to completion. But we do not yet have compelling evidence that would require us to translate these two βι- words in two different ways. Evidence from rhetorical devices and how the papyri and contemporaneous Greek literature might use βιάζεται only compounds our dilemma. No matter which option we might choose, we face a dilemma.

Another approach for seeking a satisfying understanding of how Matthew wanted his readers to understand his account in Matthew 11:12 would be to consider Matthew’s overall presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus. This exegetical brief proposes that this approach would produce support and rationale for choosing this third option that has the kingdom of heaven advancing forcefully (βιάζεται as a middle with a positive meaning) and, at the same time, violent men trying to seize this kingdom away (βιασταὶ and ἀρπάζουσιν with negative meanings and a negative understanding). Look at how this interpretation might play out in light of the rest of Matthew’s gospel:

- From the days of John the Baptist until Jesus’ words in Matthew 11, the reader of Matthew’s Gospel does not see violence against the kingdom of heaven. True, the Pharisees are complaining. But “until now” we see no violent oppression or dangerous attacks. In the chapter before our verse, Jesus does promise violence against his followers to come. But he assures his followers: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” It does not seem that Jesus is concerned about violence done to

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<sup>16</sup>You might find this quote from Google News Archive (*Milwaukee Journal*, Oct 8, 1970) to be a helpful illustration of an antanaclasis: “If you aren’t fired with enthusiasm over playing for Vince Lombardi,” it was said, “you will be fired with enthusiasm.”

his kingdom and he does not want the people in his kingdom to fear violence.

- Is the kingdom of heaven at risk in Matthew's presentation? This does not seem to be the case in light of "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."
- Does Matthew present a kingdom of heaven that is forcefully advancing? Is not this precisely the point that Jesus made with John's disciples? Jesus told these two disciples to go back to John and to describe the powerfully advancing kingdom. Jesus was not wielding an ax of judgment but he was performing miracles and drawing large crowds of listeners even as John had done. God's kingdom advanced under John's ministry of preparation and would advance to completion under Jesus' ministry of fulfillment.
- Matthew will definitely encourage his readers to take aggressive and forceful steps to maintain possession of their place in God's kingdom. He does this unequivocally in two places (Mt 5:29 and 18:9) with "if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out."
- In the chapter following our verse, Matthew reports that the Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus. But quoting Isaiah, Matthew assures his readers that Jesus would bring "justice through to victory" (12:20).
- In Matthew's fourteenth chapter, we see Herod the tetrarch, truly a violent man, carry out his violence against John the Baptist. Compelled by the command of a young woman, Herod executed John. Was Herod forward in Jesus' mind when he described John as one who did not wear the effeminate clothing of those who live in palaces and foremost in Jesus' mind when he spoke of violent men who would strive to snatch away the kingdom of heaven?
- In Matthew's twenty-third chapter, Jesus mourns, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing." As Jesus' final days and passion history begin to unfold, violent men gather in force to try to seize God's kingdom; but to no avail.
- Finally, after Jesus has inaugurated his kingdom through his perfect life, innocent suffering, and victorious resurrection, he shares powerful words with every generation of true disciples. Jesus tells his disciples to go to proclaim his gospel and to baptize nations. In this going, disciples will face persecution and violence and oppression even as their Lord did. But what is Jesus' wonderful promise so closely connected with his command to go? "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:20).

The kingdom of our Lord continues to advance forcefully and powerfully through the gospel ministry Jesus has entrusted to the care of his church. The rider of the white horse conquers with his gospel sword and continues his conquest. We are proclaiming his gospel. New disciples are being made. God's church prevails and will prevail. But at the same time, violent men continue to do everything in their power to seize control of Jesus' kingdom of light. In Nigeria, extremists in the name of their god assassinate Christians in their sleep. In Pakistan, Christians are burned out of their homes. In China, the true church must do its work and worship in houses. In our own country, Matthew's comments apply as well. In spite of angry and slanderous attacks upon Jesus' family of followers here, his kingdom advances forcefully. God's gospel unleashes its power and advances with force when we preach it. While it is day and for as long as we are free, let us preach it forcefully.