

The Forceful Men in Matthew 11:12

ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν ἡμερῶν Ἰωάννου τοῦ βαπτιστοῦ ἕως ἄρτι ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν βιάζεται, καὶ βιασταὶ ἀρπάζουσιν αὐτήν. (Matthew 11:12, UBS Greek Text)

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force (Matthew 11:12, King James Version).

From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it (Matthew 11:12, New International Version).

Introduction

The New International Version translation of the Bible broke with traditional translations of this passage by introducing a positive notion of forceful advancement of the kingdom and forceful men laying hold of it. Virtually all commentators on the passage acknowledge the difficulty of the passage, while advancing various understandings of the saying. This paper will address this saying, its context, and the reasoning underneath the various translations and understandings that have been provided concerning this passage.

The Context

This passage containing the saying, Matthew 11:2-15, is clearly about John the Baptist. The entire NIV text is included below.

Mt 11:2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples [3] to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

[4] Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: [5] The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. [6] Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

[7] As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? [8] If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. [9] Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. [10] This is the one about whom it is written:

" 'I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

[11] I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. [12] From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. [13] For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. [14] And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. [15] He who has ears, let him hear.

[16] "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others:

[17] " `We played the flute for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.'

[18] For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, `He has a demon.' [19] The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, `Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." ' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

We can make some clear observations about this passage and John the Baptist:

- 11:2 John was in prison.¹
- 11:2 From prison, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if "he was the one."²
- 11:7-9 Jesus commends John and his ministry.
- 11:9-10 Jesus refers to John as a prophet, and more than a prophet in that he is the one spoken of by Isaiah who embodies the fulfillment of some of the prophecies.
- 11:11 Jesus identifies John as the greatest of those born of woman, but cautions that the least of those born "of God" would be greater than him. This is the only remark about John in this passage that is even remotely complimentary.
- 11:13-15 Jesus continues to commend John as the "Elijah" of the prophecies.³
- 11:16-19 Jesus addresses the criticisms that he and John received.

Considering the context, the remarks about the kingdom in 11:12 seem to relate to John and Jesus' praise of his work.

Key Items in the Greek Text

There are three crucial Greek terms that are used in Matthew 11:12: *biazo*, *biastes*, and *harpazo*. Some English translations of these terms are shown below.

| Version | <i>biazo</i> | <i>biastes</i> | <i>harpazo</i> |
|---------|----------------------|----------------|----------------|
| NIV | forcefully advancing | forceful men | take hold of |
| KJV | suffereth violence | violent men | take by force |

Biazo

The verb "biazo" is used only here and in Luke 16:16. In both instances is it third person singular passive or middle voice.⁴ Here it is used intransitively. Concerning this term in this passage, BAGD⁵ says "the meaning is ... not clear."⁶ It then lists the following possibilities:

¹ Recall that this happened as a direct result of challenging the marriage of Herod to his brother's wife- Mark 6:17ff.

² This may not reflect doubt on John's part, it could easily reflect an attempt on the part of John to "hand over" his disciples to Jesus, and this situation would give his followers the chance to transfer their allegiance to Jesus from John.

³ This is probably a reference to Malachi 3:1, 4:5.

⁴ In Koine Greek, many verbs have the exact same inflection for both middle and passive voices. Which is intended is to be understood from the context. For those unfamiliar with the distinction, consider the sample uses of the verb "hit." Active usage would be "I hit." Passive usage is "I am being hit." Middle would be "I am hitting myself."

⁵ That is, the Bauer/Arndt/Gingrich/Danker lexicon.

⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 140.

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- 1) transitive⁷ passive-
 - A- in a bad sense be violently treated, be oppressed, the kingdom suffers violence through
 - a- hinderances raised against it
 - b- through the efforts of unauthorized persons to compel its coming
 - c- occupy by force
 - B- In a good sense "is sought with burning zeal"
- 2) intransitive⁸ (middle)- makes its way with triumphant force

The TDNT⁹ isn't definitive on the meaning of the term here but offers the following six possibilities:¹⁰

- a. First possibility is intransitive middle "rule of God breaks in with power." But this does not go well with the second part of the verse which seems to be interpreting the first half.
- b. To translate "the kingdom of heaven compels" (middle) is no help in this regard.
- c. The passive raises other difficulties if taken in a good sense, i.e. that people are pressing into the kingdom, since Mt. 11:1-24 seems to suggest the very opposite.
- d. Nor does the rendering "the kingdom is forcibly advanced by God" solve the problem of the second half.
- e. Another possibility is that the reference is to unprincipled enthusiasts trying to establish the kingdom on their own, but this seems to have no relevance to the general context.
- f. A final possibility is that Jesus is referring to contentious opponents who attack or hamper the kingdom and snatch it away from others (cf. 13:19). This has the merit of agreement with the fact that John himself is under constraint and that both he and Jesus have met with widespread opposition (cf. 11:2, 16, 20).

The NIDNT¹¹ offers the following: "biazō is quite rare in the active. But in the middle it expresses the idea of forcible action both in deed and word. Transitive it means to violate, rape; intransitive to use force, enforce one's will; and passive to suffer violence."¹²

In any situation where a word has multiple meanings (and there are three such terms in this short passage!), the context and common patterns of usage help determine the meaning of the term. On contextual grounds, the KJV translators opted for the negative meanings of the word here, and the NIV opted for the positive meaning. However, D.A. Carson¹³ says "biazō" is most often used in the middle voice, and he argues it should be taken as such in this passage.¹⁴ This lends support to a positive understanding of the term.

Biastes

The noun "biastes" is only used in the New Testament in this passage. BAGD defines the noun as "a violent man."¹⁵ It cites no usage where this could be understood as "zealot" or some praiseworthy attribute. However, the cognate "biaston" is an adjective and is in both positive and negative senses (as in Acts 2:2 to describe the "violent" wind of Pentecost).

TDNT offers the following: "11:12 refers most naturally to those who violently assault the divine rule and snatch it away from others."¹⁶

⁷ A transitive verb is a verb that has a direct object, for example "I hit the ball."

⁸ An intransitive verb is a verb that has no direct object, for example "I hit."

⁹ That is, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged by Bromiley

¹⁰ G. Schrenk, *Abridged Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985. 105-106; ref TDNT, I,609-614.

¹¹ That is, the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, editor Colin Brown.

¹² G. Braumann, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1975. 3:711.

¹³ Carson, D.A. *Matthew. The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1979.

¹⁴ Carson, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Bauer, 140.

¹⁶ Schrenk, *ibid.*

The DNNT offers: "... means a violent man, and carries a derogatory sense."¹⁷

Harpazo

The verb "harpazo" is used in a variety of New Testament passages, with both negative and positive connotations¹⁸ revolving around its general meaning of "snatch up." Regarding harpazo in Matthew 11:12, BAGD says "the meaning is difficult to determine. ... (it) probably means something like seize or claim for oneself. Another possibility is plunder."¹⁹

TDNT offers the following three possibilities:²⁰

- a. that the kingdom is taken away and closed.
- b. that violent people culpably snatch it.
- c. that people take it forcibly in a good sense.

It continues: The first has some support in the wording and context. The third is likely because of the irruption of the kingdom with the Baptist and the need for resoluteness to enter it. The second is intrinsically improbable."

Possible Interpretations of the Passage

Since the terms *biazo*, *biastes* and *harpazo* all have a significantly wide possibility of meaning in this passage, questions of context and the implications of certain interpretations are critical. Though the passage is quite difficult to us, we might consider that Matthew certainly didn't mean for the passage to be ambiguous. As Carson has said, we seek to find an interpretation that "does justice both to the context and the language."²¹

The NIDNT offers the following comments: "To take the verb (*biazo*) as middle gives the unlikely meaning: the kingdom of heaven uses force, it coerces. To take it as intransitive gives a more probable interpretation: the kingdom of God accomplishes its purpose mightily, it is eagerly striven for and those who violently press towards it seize (upon) it. But this translation, although frequently advocated, is still unsatisfactory, since it depicts the kingdom as "suffering violence" in a good sense, with men pressing towards it and striving vehemently to grasp it, whereas their action is more likely to be hostile. The best interpretation there, is the one which takes *biazethai* as passive in an unfavorable sense: the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men assault it, meaning either that hindrances are placed in its way, or that it is forcibly introduced."²²

Carson appeals for taking *biazo* with its usual middle voice usage, then taking *biastes* and *harpazo* with their usual negative meanings. He thus finds a positive meaning in the first phrase and a negative meaning in the second phrase. In addressing the apparent discontinuity from the first phrase to the second under this scheme, he refers to a grammatical device known as an "antianclasis." He defines this as a figure of speech where the same word is repeated in a different or even contradictory sense. Thus he allows "biazo" in a positive sense in the first phrase, and its cognate "biastes" with "harpazo" in a negative sense in the second phrase.

According to this understanding, Jesus praises the forceful advance of the kingdom (by John and whomever else), but then he condemns the "violent" men who seize the kingdom, though it is not clear whom those violent men might be or exactly how they might be "seizing the kingdom." Carson understands the saying as a message to John the Baptist, "The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, but not all opposition has been swept away." He sees this as a consolation to John in prison, speaking of a time where the kingdom is passing from the "forceful" (as in the time of John) to the weak (in the time of Jesus) in Matthew 11:25-30. This is the deciding factor for his perspective, though he does recognize the difficulty of the passage and its lack of certainty of the interpretation.

¹⁷ G. Braumann, 3:711.

¹⁸ Matthew 11:12, 12:29, 13:19, John 6:15, 10:12, 10:28, 10:29, Acts 8:39, 23:10, 2 Corinthians 12:2,4, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Jude 1:23, Revelation 12:5.

¹⁹ Bauer, 109.

²⁰ W. Foerster, Bromily 80; ref. TDNT I:472-4.

²¹ Carson, *ibid*.

²² G. Braumann, 3:712.

Some Observations

In favor of a positive understanding of the first half of this phrase (i.e. the kingdom forcefully advancing), Jesus seems to praise the happenings under consideration. In a time of covenant transition between the Law and the kingdom, a forceful advancement (in face of opposition) would be needed to make the transition.

The arguments for understanding the first phrase in a negative sense, that the kingdom is “suffering violence,” generally make their case by ignoring the middle voice of *biazo* and focusing on the negative terms in the second phrase of the saying reflecting back to the first phrase.²³ This seems unnatural, and appears to commit the fallacy of assuming what it seeks to prove. And up to this point in time in the ministry of Jesus, there really hasn’t been much “violence” directed towards the kingdom at this stage. To offer John’s imprisonment (and even conspiracies against Jesus by the Jewish leaders and Herodians) as evidence of “violence towards the kingdom” is a stretch, such violence may need to be understood in a figurative sense. But either way, there is no apparent connection between this “violence” and the context, which discusses the growth of the kingdom since the time of John.

So the sum of evidence seems to tilt towards the notion that the first phrase is positive, in that the kingdom is said to be “forcefully advancing.” It appears to be intended as a positive statement about the advance of the kingdom in the face of opposition, first in the work of John and perhaps even now in the work of Jesus. The description of John as an apparently “forceful person” (not a reed swayed by the wind, not a man dressed in fine clothes) commends this view. The idea is that the force required to advance the kingdom must be greater than the force required to suppress it.

Regarding Carson’s idea and the *atanclasis*, we could observe that “*kai*” (translated “and”) typically indicates continuity of thought, though *kai* can also be used adversatively (translated “but”) from time to time. However, his position has its weaknesses. The crux of his argument is that the kingdom goes to the meek, not the violent. Against his view, it may be said that this passage does not discuss those who *receive* the kingdom, but rather those who have *advanced* it.

The strongest factor surrounding a negative understanding of the second phrase is the negative connotation of “*biastes*” and “*harpazo*.” Yet, *harpazo* has some positive uses, and certainly could have that sense here.²⁴ And if it is used in a negative sense here, its possible meanings here are anything but clear. There is no one in the context that could even be charged with “snatching” the kingdom, in a harmful way. The possible negative meaning of *harpazo* is not the chief obstacle to understanding the second phrase in a positive sense.

The use of “*biastes*” following the usage of its cognate “*biazo*” in the first phrase seems to equate the “violent men” in the second phrase with the “forceful advancers of the kingdom” in the first phrase. Now if we regard “*biazo*” in the first phrase in a positive sense, is it unreasonable to also regard “*biastes*” in a positive sense? And considering that this is a fairly rare word, it makes the synonymous usage easily acceptable, even if it is rare. Carson’s *atanclasis* may not be necessary.

Another factor in favor of regarding both halves of 11:12 as positive is the postpositive “*gar*” (for) near the beginning of the sentence in Matthew 11:13. This seems to point to both halves of the saying in 11:12 being positive and referring to Jesus and his disciples. The point of what Jesus is saying is that the coming of the kingdom is a time of revolution, a time for spiritually strong men. Not literally violent, but those who are prepared to commit themselves to the kingdom and its advance in the face of strong opposition.

Conclusion

We have considered a significant body of scholarly opinion concerning this passage. Even if the scholars cannot agree about the meaning of this passage, they all agree that it is difficult.

²³ Carson, *ibid*.

²⁴ John 6:15, Acts 8:39, 2 Corinthians 12:2,4, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, Jude 1:23, Revelation 12:5. In each of these uses, *harpazo* is for some intended good purpose.

The first part of the saying is in all likelihood a positive statement about the advancement of the kingdom. Though not unanimous, there is strong scholarly support for this position. Even if this is not true, the basic meaning of the saying is clear: The kingdom is advancing with a force stronger than its opposition.

Different understandings of the second part of the saying exist. The arguments for taking the second part of the saying as a positive or a negative statement have been presented. The context and the possibility that the terms “biastes” and “harpazo” are used in a positive sense outweigh the factors that would suggest a negative connotation of the second half of the saying. Yet, there are serious difficulties with the passage and it does not appear possible to make a definitive statement concerning the meaning of the second phrase in the saying.

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