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Taking the Kingdom by Force

Matthew 11:12

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

This is such an odd translation in the KJV and seems to fly in the face of Jesus' other teachings and descriptions of the Kingdom. First off, all the relevant ancient words we have for "kingdom" in the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic (basileia, mamlaka, and malkuta respectively) do not refer to territory or a place primarily, but to a reign, dominion, rule, or even by extension the will or presence of the king. Jesus reinforces this understanding in several key verses such as Mark 1:15:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

But here, the Greek word eggizo, translated "at hand" also means "has already arrived," so Jesus is telling us the kingdom is here/now, exists already. And in Luke 17:21:

"...For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."

And here, the Greek entos can mean in the midst, within, and among, so the kingdom is here/now and within and among us, all reinforcing the non-territoriality of the Kingdom of Heaven. Further, it should be noted that though Matthew uses "Kingdom of Heaven," the other gospels primarily use "Kingdom of God." The two phrases need to be seen as one and the same, as Matthew, writing to primarily Jewish audience follows the Hebrew custom of avoidance of using the name of God. Heaven (shemaya) was a common euphemism for the name of God in the first century.

So as we look at the most important concept of Jesus' teaching, the Kingdom of Heaven, a proper understanding is critical to an overall understanding of his teaching. Jesus spent a great deal of time trying to get the concept of what the Kingdom was/is across to his listeners. Understanding this difficult verse in context is also important, since, by bringing images of violence into the framework, it seems to be presenting a different picture. In reality, once the contextual linguistics are cleared up, we find not only a consistent picture once again, but an even more powerful reinforcing image of what Jesus means by Kingdom and our participation in it.

Original Intent

Looking back at the target verse, Mt 11:12 in KJV, first we find that the Greek verb biazo has been poorly translated. First, in a cross reference to the parallel passage in Luke 16:16 we find:

"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it."

So here, instead of the idea of "suffering violence," we have the idea of proclaiming. Besides the shift from a passive tense to an active one, we also have a completely different concept in the first half, and a slightly different image in the second half, though related and still violent: the shift from taking by force or forcing a way into it. The NIV translates the Matthew passage this way:

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

This translation is much better than any of the other English translations as it captures an active rather than passive meaning of the verb *biazo*, carries the idea of force as well as progressive movement, and brings the parallel passages into closer harmony. It also brings this passage into closer harmony with other teachings on the kingdom. But until we get into the Hebrew/Aramaic renderings, it's almost impossible to get the full impact of Jesus meaning here across just from the Greek.

This may seem contradictory, since it's widely assumed that the Gospels were first written in Greek, then it should follow that the Greek should carry the full weight of any interpretation. But remember, even if Matthew was first written in Greek—which is by no means a certainty, as more and more scholars begin to admit to a now-lost Hebrew or Aramaic original—it's still most likely that Jesus first *spoke* his teachings in Aramaic/Hebrew and that written collections of those sayings existed and were used by the Gospel writers in compiling their gospels. We can't get away from the context of the meaning in the original languages. And here we find a very different concept.

The Breakers

Though we don't have Hebrew or Aramaic autographs for the Gospels and rest of the NT, we do have the Syriac Peshitta, a fourth century manuscript of the entire bible with apocrypha, which the Eastern Orthodox church believes is a copy of the original text of the NT, later translated into Greek. We also have the Septuagint, a 3rd century BCE Greek translation of the OT. Since the Septuagint and the OT of the Peshitta agree pretty closely, Western scholars say the Peshitta is a translation of the Septuagint and other Greek versions of the NT, while Eastern scholars say the Septuagint and the Peshitta are translation and copy (respectively) of an earlier Hebrew/Aramaic original, which is why they agree closely.

Whatever direction you come down on these issues, by cross referencing passages and words in the Peshitta and Septuagint, we can find the Aramaic and Hebrew words standing behind the Greek words of the NT. This is the technique used to find the Hebrew behind the words of Mt 11:12.

The Greek word "*biazo*" was used to translate the Hebrew word *paratz*—to "break forth"—in the Septuagint in a number of places. *Biazo* also includes the idea of "breaking forth." This is the best rendering of *biazo* in this passage on the kingdom in the sense of breaking forth from within and moving outward. It's an internal rather than external function that is in keeping with the Mark and Luke passages above reflecting the now-ness and within-ness of the kingdom. Further, since the Greek noun "*biastai*" translated as "violent men" or "forceful men" comes from the verb *biazo*, it should be translated as "the breakers," especially when the context of Micah 2:13 is taken into account.

"The breaker (*haporetz*) goes up before them; They break out (*partzu*), pass through the gate and go out by it. So their king goes on before them, And the LORD at their head."

So there is a breaker going out before the king who opens up a breach through which all the people break forth with their king before them and the Lord at their head. This is the image of the work of John the Baptist as the preparer of the way, the breaker who makes the breach that allows the people to break forth with Jesus and the kingdom. As the kingdom is within, the image is of the kingdom breaking forth with the people, expanding outward.

A further image is of the ancient sheepfold that Jesus alludes to in John 10:9 where the shepherd would construct a sheepfold by piling rocks into a crude wall with an opening at one end. After driving the sheep into the enclosure, the shepherd would either fashion a gate or simply sleep in the opening, literally becoming the "gate" as Jesus says in John 10. By morning, the sheep are so anxious to get out to pasture that when the shepherd opens the gate, they all rush out at once, jumping over each other, breaking forth and usually breaking the opening further by knocking down rocks in the process.

Translation

So a good Hebrew/Aramaic translation of Mt 11:12 might read:

Since the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of Heaven breaks forth, and those breaking forth are pursuing (seeking) it.

In the second half of this verse, the idea behind the interplay between the Greek noun *biastai* (the violent men or breakers) and the Greek verb *harpazo* (taking by force) includes the function of taking, stealing, capturing, grasping, catching, pursuing, or seeking earnestly. Instead of violent men taking the kingdom by force, with the idea of those are breaking out are also pursuing it, Jesus is painting a consistent picture of the Kingdom as the reign of God (and since God in Hebrew means Unity), as the reign of Unity that exists now and within the hearts of his people, that with the advent of John and Jesus, is breaking outward forcefully, with all the people breaking out with it, dynamically and actively (not passively). And those who are breaking out are earnestly pursuing and seeking this reign in their lives. The imagery of the release of captives is also present here with its double meaning of forgiveness—as the word for release and forgive are the same in the Hebrew/Aramaic.

Where does all this get us? Contemporary Christianity has largely equated the Kingdom of Heaven with the concept of “heaven,” the afterlife place of reward with God. Understanding the kingdom this way allows for serious misunderstanding of Jesus’ teaching. Suddenly, admission into “heaven” is now governed by behavior, and the system starts to look legal again. When we understand that the kingdom as taught by Jesus is actually the presence and reign of God’s unity right here and now, everything changes. Our behavior is indicative of our ability to participate in the unity between us and God and each other in any given moment (as in Jesus prayer in John 17) rather than in some future time in the afterlife.

Beyond that, verses such as Mt 11:12 and Luke 16:16 give another insight into the kingdom. It’s a dynamic and active, even violent explosion outward from within that carries all of us along with it, or at least those who are earnestly seeking and pursuing the presence of God in their lives. The Gospel and Kingdom become the call and the manifestation of Immanuel—God with us, right here and right now in our lives. This is the crux of Jesus teaching and his desire for us to live abundant lives (John 10:10).