

IMPLICATIONS OF VIOLENT ACCEPTANCE OF THE KINGDOM IN MATTHEW 11:12 FOR AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCHES

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Abstract

The book of Matthew Chapter 11 verse 12 is seen as a very difficult passage among scholars and exegetes. It is a problem for the exegetical art.¹ Consequent upon this, different interpretations of this particular passage have been given and the interpreters or commentators have tried to get the right interpretation with the help of the exegetical principles, while many scholars have not been able to conclude or give precise contributions. Interpreting the passage as an instruction to struggle for the Kingdom is popular among the African Indigenous Churches as it is quoted in prayers and sermons related to warfare. This paper employs exegetical method. The paper aimed to examine different interpretations of scholars and their implications for African Indigenous Churches. The work established the fact that the interpretation of the Kingdom of God in Matt.11:12 should be interpreted as both realized and futuristic. This kingdom, present and in future culmination, should not be struggled for but must be attained through repentance, trust and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (not by work) who has come to deliver man –kingdom as present and, who will come again to take away his own –Kingdom as futuristic.

Keyword: Violence, New Testament Kingdom, Africa, Indigenous Church

Introduction

In all the Kingdom Sayings in the Gospel of Matthew --only one related to John (Mtt. 3:2), others are being spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ. In Matthew's great discourse, God is given the wide spread oriented designation "Great king" (Mtt. 5:35), that Jesus descended from David and addressed as the son of David is also affirmed in the Gospel and is called 'the king' in connection with the future, He is referred to as the Judging son of man (25:30, 40).¹The gospel makes the Kingdom explicitly emphatic. It emphasized that Jesus was a Galilean who was wandering and going to the Synagogue teaching and preaching about the Kingdom of God and performing miraculously. Matthew had the Gentile mission in view when he says that the gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to nations (24:14). Here is Jesus preaching about himself merging it with the Kingdom preaching.¹

To summarize the messages in the gospel of Matthew are messages of Jesus and John the Baptist and messages about Jesus. The Kingdom of God as Presented is temporal and primarily eschatological and Christological. It draws near with Jesus and the pre-requisites of entering into it are ethical and the opponents are dominated by the Kingdom of Satan. Though John announced Jesus as the Messiah they were awaiting. Subsequent to the announcement was his quest of the proof of Jesus Messiahship. It should be noted that John was in a terrible situation – imprisoned by Herod. His quest came from the prison. Jesus response to his quest leaves the disciples of John to determine what answer they would take to their master. Key-phrases should be analyzed for better understanding.

Key Word Study of Matthew 11:12

1. “Days ... Until Now:”

Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines ‘day’ as the period of the earth's revolution on its axis. It could be defined as specified time or period, age, time.”¹ The plural form of it denotes the significance of the events referred. Day signifies a period of 24 hours and this is found both in the Old Testament and New Testament. For instance the days of creation as in Gen.1:5ff are reckoned evening and morning, day of Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23. The Hebrews after the exile and in New Testament times, like the Babylonian, reckoned the day as beginning with sunset and extending to ‘the following sunset of Neh. 13:19.¹

Days and night are seen as distinct from each other in the creation story as in Gen. 1:4 where light is separated from darkness. Mesopotamian division of day light into 12 double hours and the night into three watches is not found in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the Jews have adopted the Greek division of the day into 12 hours from sunrise to sunset; the length of the hours varied in accord with season of the year cf Mtt. 20:3, 5, 6; Jn 1: 9. But day is equally used to signify an appointed time, a season or a period.¹

Hebrew ideas of days are also in Greek in the use of *καιρος* which is characterized by the fact that it depicts “filled time”. Day (*ημερα*) is associated with *καιρος* as hour (*ωρα*).¹ The “...until now”, therefore, tells of the life span and the end of the dispensation since the period in the internal is progressive leading to a definite time period or day.

2. Violence / Violent;

According to Webster's Dictionary, violence is the exertion of any physical force to affect a gain or gain entrance. It is an instance of violence treatment of procedure. In dealing with the word violence, it simply signifies crime, it simply signifies crime, revolution, not or terrorism. For example, from a legal standpoint, a crime or riot etc is a violation of the criminal law. Such law deals with actions considered harmful to society,¹ but we are not considering the legal standpoint or else we go astray from the main point of discussion, but we must note that most harmful acts against another person are violations because they are in practice against the normal

actions expected in the society, hence, the word violation or violence is 'evil' and must not in any way be used to make a positive assertion.

Violence, depending on how the word will serve the user can signify God's will, used against them and can also become a sign of shame and degradation. For the white men violence is good but for Blacks when they use it, they are considered animals. No one that is reflective will deny that violence is a word subjected to frequent manipulation.¹

In the Greek New Testament the word *βία* (violence) is not frequently used. There are two passages where this word could be found Mtt. 11:2 and Lk. 16:16.¹ The word *βία* means force, impetus, violence, *βιάζομαι* which is in the middle voice means to urge, constrain, overpower by force, to beg earnestly forward, to rush as in Luke 16:16. Its passive form depicts an object of an impetuous as in Mtt. 11:12 *βιαίος* means violent or revilement while *βίαστης* refers to the one that uses violence, one who is forceful in eager pursuit in Mtt. 11:12 in parsing it is third person singular, present, middle or passive mood.¹

Syntactical Study of Mtt. 11:12

Syntax according to Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (unabridged) is orderly or systematic arrangement. In grammar, it is the arrangement of words as elements in a sentence to show their relationship. In other words syntax shows the mutual relations of certain words in sentence or verse. It follows the language under study. There are three turning points which must be considered with care (1) "from the days of John the Baptist until now" (2) "the Kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing" and (3) "And forceful men lay hold of it."¹

First, the phrase "from the days of John the Baptist until now" as pointed out by some commentators in verse 10-11 depicts putting John within the Kingdom that is, it is another way of saying "from the time of the activity of John the Baptist."¹ Some argue that the "until now" is referring to Matthew's time of writing (as also suggested by Hill) not until Jesus' time of speaking, this interpretation is plausible because the violent ransacking the Kingdom did not happen at John's death via Jesus' earthly ministry.¹ A better synthesis would consider the entire expression (from the days of John the Baptist) as the Kingdom was inaugurated although lies in the past. The Kingdom begins in a preliminary way with Jesus' preaching and powerful works. The attack as in "forcefully advancing" has been going on even under Jesus during the days of John, for there has to be a 'temporal overlap, if there is need for a forerunner at all who would point out the messiah"¹

Second, "The Kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing" has been a problem even in the exegetical art, especially with the word *βιάζεται*.¹ Some scholars have taken it to be middle. For instance, D. A. Carson asserts that in Greek sources relevant to the New Testament *βιάζεται* is considerably more common in the deponent middle than in the active or passive voice,¹ in view of Luke 16:16 which denotes spiritual violence e.g. self denial.¹

Carson emphasizes the fact that to adopt passive form is to go contrary to the gospels' emphasis and that the notion would deal poorly with *βιαστης* since it cannot be rendered in a positive sense. But it must be noted here that the emphasis of the gospels is to distinguish and tell of the uniqueness of the ministry of Jesus and the fact that *βιαστης* is used to refer to forceful men or violent men in a negative sense is to tell of the infliction¹ on the kingdom of God.¹This leads us to the third part.

“And forceful men lay hold of it”. The noun *βιαστης* is an extremely rare noun, it simply means in a substitute manner or sense “violent men.”¹ Considering how *βιάζεται* is used (passive) it speaks of violence inflicted on the Kingdom of Heaven in which Jesus condemns. There, the general conception of violence is not assumed but a specific violence directed at the Kingdom”. This leads to passive interpretation which refers *βιαστης* to the enemies of the divine rule, the opponents, hence, the Kingdom of God is lacked or hampered”¹Considering the order of the day, the saying might be pronounced against the zealots who were members of a religious group that sought the rule of heaven by unprincipled enthusiasts through violent actions. Hence, Jesus was rebuking them by the statement.

The advantages of the interpretation above corresponds to most of the linguistic parallels and that the second part of the saying can be analyzed in the same sense as elucidation of the hostile *βιαστης* to mean that the Kingdom is taken from men by the violent.¹

Historico-Syntactical Study of Matthew 11:1-19

According to Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (unabridged) synthesis is the composition, the putting together of two or more things so as to form a whole. It is opposed to analysis. In the first verse, Jesus sent out his twelve disciples in pairs to preach and heal. It must be noted that the opposition to Jesus as it begins in chapter 8:34 where the leaders of the nation, jealous of the rising influence of Jesus seek in all ways to offset his hold upon the common people by the insinuation there mentioned. This opposition was intensified by this sending out of the twelve disciples but the development of it is seen all along in the chapters follow down practically till the close of chapter 12.

It begins indeed in the doubts of John the Baptist (11:1-30).¹ Actually, it is made known that in Jesus replying John, the Savior who is Jesus presents himself and his credentials as the messiah and showed his authority. It was immediately after the sending scene that John heard of Jesus' miracle works while he was in prison by Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. It was in the third verse that he showed that he did not fully understand the plan and programme of the messiah whom he had announced, asking if he (Jesus) was the messiah, the one that should come or they should look for another.¹ This shows the mind of the Jews as regarding the messiah. They were expecting the messiah that would deliver them from the governance of Herod which was prophesied by the prophets. In response to John's question, Jesus sent back John's disciples to him to tell him of what they have seen miracles as listed in verse five.

The Zealots and all those demanding a worldly messiah were offended in Christ because he did not collect an army and proceed to the usual worldly pattern.¹ Jesus therefore, warned and blessed those who shall not be offended in him like Zealots.

Among Jesus' followers were many who had been disciples of John the Baptist. This question might lead them (some) to think Jesus was not the messiah despite the many miracles they saw Jesus performing. Jesus took it upon himself therefore to explain who John was and his credentials and lastly explained who he was (Jesus) and his ministry. From verse nineteen to twenty-two. He distinguished in the chapter the ministry of John and his own personal ministry. The supreme tribute to John was true sincere and pleasing to John's disciple, but John with all his greatness had only been privileged to announce the Kingdom which was to come. Lo and behold the Kingdom has come in the person of Jesus Christ.¹

In verse 12, he stepped a pace to explain the Kingdom and certain reactions against it. Obviously, before the advent of Christ, there had been different parties (religious) who were very anxious to bring down the Kingdom, some in a spiritual mood and some in a political attempt. These parties include Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots. The zealots are political. They are the advocates of "violent overthrow" of Rome. They were also doing their utmost to capture Jesus' "popular following" and miraculous power for their use for their own purpose. It must be noted expediently that the Kingdom's experience was not past but a present continuous experience as at the time Jesus was speaking. Some versions render it past e.g. RSV. The Greek version uses the word *αρπαζωσιν* which means take seize or in continuous sense and *βιαζεται* which means "to be forced". The most probable explanation of the above point seems to be that the words suffers violence are a reference to the numerous attempts made by revolutionary Jews to establish a national government by force".¹

Jesus made the statement as we have it in verse twelve to rebuke those struggling for the Kingdom by their efforts zealots. Jesus further showed distinction between his own ministry and John's ministry dating John's ministry as one of the Old Testament prophets. The rebuke trend which started from verse twelve continued and was made spectacular from verse 15 to 17 to mean that of all John's preachings and signs about him people have not still believed. In verses eighteen and nineteen is seen a picture of distinction in the ministry of both of the two personalities Jesus and John.

From the above consideration therefore, it is not hard or too difficult to hold to the fact that Jesus' and John's ministry are different although both are for the Kingdom but Jesus' ministry is special and the type of the Kingdom expected by the Jews and John himself was not found in Jesus. The statement of Jesus about violent refers to the zealots who were looking for a way of getting themselves free from the governance of Herod. That is not the eschatological Kingdom. The apocalyptic or eschatological Kingdom is in Christ.

Assessments of Various Interpretation of Matt. 11:12

There are many interpretations suggested by scholars as earlier said. Here we shall look at some interpretations suggested by certain scholars.

C. H. Dodd in his own interpretation sees John as not merely one of the prophets but greater than any prophet because his ministry precedes great divine event that is the kingdom of God. Dodd adds that the original form of the saying and the precise meaning to be given to it are difficult to determine especially the b' part of it which talks about the kingdom, but that the contrast is drawn between the past and present and it was John the Baptist that marks the dividing line. It seems to him (Dodd) that the general implication of the whole passage Mtt. 11:418 with its Lucan parallels are unmistakable in dealing with the dispensation of the two peculiar ministries the old closed with the ministry of John and the new begins with the ministry of Jesus. But Dodd is silent about the interpretation of violent or violence and the Kingdom.¹

According to Albert Schweitzer, who accommodated the artificial solutions that some exegetes from the past have been accustomed in order to find a way out, in his reference to Wendt, Wernle and Arnold Meyer he supports the view that the Kingdom of God is here but rejects the meaning given to the passage by Arnold Meyer that "from the days of John the Baptist, it has been possible to get possession of the Kingdom of God; yea, the righteous everyday earning it for their own". To him, no enough explanation has been given to make intelligible how Jesus could have dated the presence of the Kingdom from the Baptist and questioned the unnatural and inappropriate use of the word 'rape' and 'wrest for themselves'.¹

He opposed or argued against Johanness Weiss who in a natural sense considers it to mean that the Kingdom was subjected to violence and takes it in a condemnatory sense and that he describes Jesus as condemning the 'violent zealolistic messianic movement' that has been in progress from the time of John the Baptist.¹ Albert, against the above submission asked the question "what indication is there that the sense is condemnatory?" and that no other place where we can hear more about the movement. But he (Albert) submitted that insufficient understanding of the essential character of the Kingdom of God makes us not to understand why Jesus has described it as it is in the passage along with the statement he made on how John is identical with Elias.¹ Albert has succeeded in criticizing other works but has not been able to give his own interpretation or make suggestion of which interpretation is right or that he was neutral for a reason not is closed.

Reginald Fuller in his argument against the realized eschatology said that the proclamation of the coming Kingdom is taking place and therefore the performance of Jesus is a sign of the Kingdom's impending advents. He also said of how the Kingdom suffer violence as probably in the resistance that the Kingdom encountered by its proclamation. He mentioned the advantage of this interpretation of which he said that it brings the saying into line with the parable of the children of the market

place that follows. He states that the saying of the passage means that the violent men who resist the message of Christ also prevent people from accepting it.¹

David Dickson in his work of interpretation considers verse twelve as the sixth point of Christ's commendation of John. He said of this verse as making ascertain the doctrine of John's preaching through which the gate of heaven and church were made patent for any man both Jews and Gentiles to come in. In other words even those who do not have the Levitical lights could also gain entrance into the Kingdom. He further stated that the legal ceremonies actually were meant to lead men to Christ and so God was not displeased that man overpassed and violently ran over.¹ In essence, David, I guess, tries to balance the two parties' access into the Kingdom in two different ways legal ceremonies for the Jews and grace for the Gentiles. This interpretation of the passage may prove right without looking into the original intention. In other words, it seems to be an adverse interpretation considering the historico-syntactical analysis of the scenario. In this sense personal theology is been read into the passage, making the passage not to speak for itself.

David Hill says that the "now" in which is stated in the passage may refer to 'time of when Jesus was speaking and the time the editor of the gospel was writing.¹ This is not in line with the context, for it is obvious that Jesus was speaking directly in the passage not in a reported form as thought by Hill. But Hill gave a good interpretation of the passage somewhat by saying that the *βιάζεται βιασσης* denotes either the zealotists or those who would want to take the Kingdom of God by force.¹ Hence he takes it in a passive form.

In Johanness Weiss view of the interpretation of the passage, he condemns the views that conclude that one can make oneself a member of the Kingdom of God by energetic resolve because the Kingdom of God is at hand, which simply means that those who perceived in Christ the expected one and had entered into the Kingdom have done it with extra ordinary figure *βιασταιαρπαζοντες* This is not conceivable and so Weiss condemns it and asserts that the words *βιασταιαρπαζοντες* must be understood in the sense of a rebuke, he further said: Jesus is describing the king of people who had been aroused by the Baptists preaching to the point of impassioned agitation. Jesus rebukes them because they wish to seize by force what they should be waiting for instead. They want to climb up to heaven to hand the Kingdom down (Rom. 10:6).

He also said that there is no other Kingdom of God as a community or concrete entity but that the main fault or frailty, which is to be rebuked even in the Baptist and which he had called into being is "impassioned impatience."¹ This view to me is more appropriate. It gives the sequential detail about the verse even exegetically no one can lay hold of the Kingdom of his effort unless he is given as a free gift. To take *βιάζεται* in the sense of an intransitive middle, it is interpreted as the rule of God breaking in with power is force and this is against the basic eschatological concept of the Kingdom of God.¹

Another interpretation popularized by Luther Martin is that *βιάζεται* denotes the ardent pressure of needy souls from the time of the Baptist to seize the Kingdom as a prey. But Jesus' statements in other places opposed this interpretation. For instance cf Mk. 10:17ff: Mtt. 5:3ff 7:21.¹

Theological Implications for African Indigenous Churches

Evidently the art of interpreting the Scripture is not an easy task, this is because the Holy Scripture was written long time ago and one must strive to interpret it considering the culture language and the context in which the passage is written. An attempt to interpret the scriptures outside the biblical context makes us err from the right interpretation. But at the same time after considering the major basic background of the passage, it has to be appropriated to the modern man, and in respect to this paper, African, so as to make the interpretation relevant to him. But this has to be carefully done.

The way some passages of the Bible explain the concept of the Kingdom of God to some extent is quite explicit enough. In fact, it presents the concept in a way that one could easily discern and understand it. The Scriptures present to us both arrived and futuristic Kingdom (present and consistent eschatology). It presents that the Kingdom of God is present in Christ Jesus who has come to deliver men from the bondage of the devil and his agents and to save man from eternal death. He did this by rendering his own life, he accepted to take upon himself the sin of the world so that man enjoys freedom.

Hence, we say that the kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus' miraculous deeds in the world like healing the sick, making the leper to be healed, raising the dead e.g. Lazarus and preaching about the Kingdom of God as in Mtt. 4:17. These are the signs that show that the Kingdom of God has come. But some scholars agree strongly that this Kingdom has come and should not expect any other Kingdom in other words the Kingdom of God has arrived this might in their own part be too extreme. Although, some scholars still hold to the fact that the Kingdom of God is futuristic, they held to the fact that Jesus has only come to preach about the Kingdom and that he enjoins all to prepare for that Kingdom.

But looking critically at the Kingdom parables e.g. parable of the sower (Mtt. 13:3-9), parable of the tares Mtt. 13:24-30), parables of the Grain of mustard seed Mtt 13:31-32 and so on. One would conclude that there are two events found in hem all, and the two events are: That the establishment is made, for example, the parable of mustard seed and the parable of the leaven, and the period in which the Kingdom will manifest globally is the second period of the event. In other orders, the Kingdom of God is somehow in hidden form because of the expected he that is eternal although the one that is present is also eternal but a man could be his salvation in the course of the journey. For those that are able to scale through, theirs is that Kingdom. So, there are both the arrived and future Kingdom and both are relevant

to each other, but one must note that Jesus is the eschatological event as affirmed by Perrin Norman.

Matthew presents both the Kingdom of God as present and the Kingdom of God as futuristic, and in Jesus' view he presents himself as the one whom the world was expecting but could not recognize him. He declared himself to be the messiah in whom the Kingdom has come, although in other passages like chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew he explains the tribulation that is to come and his second advent and those who will reign with him after the rapture for a period of time.

The major concern of God for man is salvation and this is only found in the Kingdom of God since there are two contending forces - Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Satan. From time immemorial, God promised his kingdom to come and which eventually came in the person of Christ which scholars termed to be "realized eschatology". Having considered the ministry of Jesus, we could agree that he displayed his kingship by performing miracles and his death after all. Other prophets who had been before him and even during his time prophesied about him. His ministry distinguished divinely in all ramifications. This he intended doing in the passage (Mtt. 11:1-19).

The experience of the Kingdom with the violent zealots probably was aggressive. Jesus made the statement to rebuke the act and to show how senseless it is for the zealots to fight for the Kingdom of God by their own effort, he rebuked them not to encourage people to aggressively take the Kingdom of God. No-one can lay hold of the Kingdom nor gain entrance into the Kingdom by his effort. It is given as a gift. As in Mtt. 11:12, one cannot gain his salvation through struggling. Instead, salvation in the kingdom of God is offered freely onto men who decide to take or abandon.

In most of the African Indigenous Churches, many people or preachers have been interpreting Matthew 11:12 in a wrong way. They preach that the Kingdom of God must be struggled for. If Luke 16:16 is interpreted in that way, it may be a bit alright but the context of Matthew 11:12 would not allow for such interpretation. Man works and he is paid after presenting the work. The payment he receives is not a gift but an obligation, but for a man who does not work but having the knowledge of God and trusting Him by faith he receives a gift God justifies him Rom. 4:4.

Conclusion

The Kingdom of God is both realized and futuristic. This Kingdom, present and in future culmination, should not be struggled for but must be attained through repentance, trust and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (not by works) who:

1. has come to deliver man –kingdom as present and,
2. who will come again to take away his own –kingdom as futuristic.

Upon all, the tension in between Kingdom Present and the Kingdom Future, --between the fulfillment and consummation of God's promise of salvation for humans, history is not only applied to history but also to the

experience of an individual and the experience is not through struggling, it is for one to repent and receive a free gift. Therefore, “the Kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent take it by force” is a word of rebuke and should not be taken as a statement to stir up people to violently struggle for the Kingdom. So, the word *βίασθης* in Matt 11:12 must be taken as passive.

Notes and References

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- ²⁵ Ibid., 108.
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- ³⁰ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 264.
- ³¹ Ibid also see Johannes Weiss in his work *Jesus' Proclamation of the kingdom of God*. He said that the violence that is to be rebuked even in Baptist in impassioned impatience. John was so foreign to the kingdom to the extent that some are much lesser would far surpass him. 68-69.
- ³² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 265
- ³³ Reginald H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus Studies in Systematical Theology*, No. 12 (London: SCM Press, 1960). Further said whichever this difficult passage is interpreted it does not imply a realized eschatology.
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