



[Matthew 11:11-15](#)

The coming of the kingdom is violent

Date: 70 CE

Place: Antioch (majority view)

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Matthew

Reference:

11:11-15

Commentary:

Much scholarship has been devoted to establishing the Jewish context of Matthew's Gospel, with its Gentile context (including significantly the Roman imperial system) less discussed. Some scholars of the last decade or so, however, have sought to address this. There have been two dominant positions on this issue: 1) that the Matthean author is addressing a mixed audience of both Jews and Gentiles, and as such, supports taking the salvific message of Jesus to both (see Brendan Byrne, "The Messiah in whose Name 'The Gentiles will Hope,'" p. 55-73); and 2) the Gospel writer's community have suffered greatly at the hands of the Romans in Antioch, and wish to avoid the Gentile world as far as possible (see David Sim, "The Gospel of Matthew and the Gentiles," p. 19-48). In order to appreciate the complexity of the Matthean author's narrative, the Roman imperial context cannot be ignored, as it is alluded to in various episodes with varying degrees of subtlety.

In this passage, Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of heaven has been subject to violence and oppression ever since the time of John of the Baptist (whom we learn earlier in the Gospel has been thrown in prison by Herod Antipas – Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVIII:116-119, supports the Gospel accounts on this point, claiming that the king was threatened by John's growing number of followers, and feared a rebellion). The violence that Jesus speaks of here can be interpreted in line with various other allusions in the Gospel (e.g. 4:13-16) as subtly referencing Roman imperial domination, suggested by what some scholars (see below) understand to be allusions to the violence against John by the Roman-controlled tetrarch, Herod Antipas. Moreover, it is possible that Jesus's warning about the "seizing" of the kingdom are suggestive of those who would use the Jesus movement as a way to rebel against Rome, thereby "seizing" it for political purposes which it does not seek to pursue.

That the mentioned violence is in part a reference to John the Baptist's ill treatment by Herod Antipas (Matthew 4:12, 14:1-12, 17:12), who has him imprisoned and ultimately beheaded, is a likely possibility. For Gerd Theissen, the praise of John in this passage and previously in Matthew 11:7-10 subtly critiques Herod Antipas, whom the Gospel writer sees in quite an opposite light – he has allowed himself to be used by the Roman government in order to have access to power, and essentially acts as its puppet (see Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 26-39). John, on the other hand, is a prophet, and is identified with Elijah, sent to prepare the way for the one who will bring about the time of fulfilment of God's plan (see Hebrews 11:39-40); John has an essential role in the eschatological scheme. He has set the stage, and Jesus, superior to John, now ushers in the kingdom of heaven. As Richard France points out, however, despite his crucial role in God's plan, John is confined to the outskirts, and remains a representative of the old era, not the new age which Jesus champions (Richard France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 429).

Jesus makes abundantly clear that all those associated with the kingdom of heaven will be subject to violence and suffering, and in this sense follow in the footsteps of Elijah (see especially Matthew 17:11-13) and the prophets (see 2 Chronicles 36:15-16). It is interesting that the verb "to seize" (?????) is used in verse 12, as the kingdom of heaven is not something material, and so cannot be plundered in the traditional sense of the word. It is possible that this "seizing" or "plundering" might refer to the Christian followers stolen away by the false prophets and false Messiahs warned against in [Matthew 24:3-31](#), or the "wolves dressed in sheep's clothing" of Matthew 7:15, who exploit the church for their own ends. Richard France hypothesises, however, that this could be a reference to individuals with less spiritual allegiance to the kingdom of heaven, instead seeing the Jesus movement as one from which they can challenge Rome, and attempting to "seize" it for such political purposes (Richard France, *The*



Gospel of Matthew, p. 430). This would echo the over-enthusiastic crowd of John 6:15, where the same verb is used to describe their attempted “seizing” of Jesus to try and make him king. It is not necessary for only one of the above interpretations to be correct, indeed, Jesus makes clear throughout the Gospel that the kingdom of heaven will come under varied and intense opposition and suffering. Perhaps then, his comment is left deliberately vague, in order to encompass this range of challenges to God’s plan.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Elijah](#)
- [John the Baptist](#)
- [kingdom of heaven](#)
- [law](#)
- [prophecy](#)
- [prophet](#)
- [Roman occupation](#)
- [violence](#)

Bibliographical references: Byrne, Brendan, [“The Messiah in Whose Name ‘The Gentiles will Hope’ \(Matt 12:21\): Gentile Inclusion as an Essential Element of Matthew’s Christology”](#), Australian Biblical Review 50 (2002) : 55-73

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