

1. Introduction

An Undesigned Coincidence is an insignificant detail within a narrative which matches some other, independent, detail in such a way that the two point to a consistent fact which does not form part of the main narrative.

The reason for considering such coincidences is because they are a good indicator that the narrative in question is an accurate report of a real incident. One can see that it would be difficult to invent a narrative with the level of detail in which an undesigned coincidence might appear; it would be even more difficult to agree such details among several different authors writing independently.

The presence of an undesigned coincidence is therefore an important indicator that the narratives in which the coincidence is embedded are accurate and detailed recollections of a real event.

The existence of undesigned coincidences within Bible narratives is thus an important indicator of the reliability of those narratives. Numerous such coincidences have been observed; this paper contains a summary of 50 undesigned coincidences in the Gospel records alone (including six sub-coincidences). There are many more in other parts of the Bible and probably many more to be discovered.

1.1 The Significance of Undesigned Coincidences

The reason for studying undesigned coincidences is that they provide good evidence that the text in which they exist is an accurate account of a real situation. In a court of law one might look for undesigned coincidences between witnesses to see whether the witness is telling the truth and has an accurate recollection of what occurred. In historical research one might use the technique to decide whether an account is from an eyewitness or whether it was written much later from hearsay.

It would be very difficult for a single author to devise an undesigned coincidence that could be included in a fictional account. It would also be uneconomic unless the coincidence was a significant part of the main plot of the narrative, in which case it would not be a genuinely insignificant detail and would not count as a proper undesigned coincidence. For an author to produce a real undesigned coincidence would be to spend a great deal of effort to include a minor detail in the narrative which would probably never be appreciated by any of the people who read the narrative; probably only a small proportion of the undesigned coincidences in the Bible have so far been found. This has very little return for the writer.

If a fictional writer were to generate a set of corresponding details which would make an undesigned coincidence the only way that this would generate a return for the author would be if the author were to draw one's attention to it. This does not happen in the Bible. One can therefore conclude that the writers were either unaware of the undesigned coincidences or considered them to be of no value.

What is difficult for a single author becomes impossible for a group of different authors. Even if one author was able to create an undesigned coincidence and had the motivation to hide it in the story knowing it would probably never be noticed, it would be impossible to collude with other authors in the creation of undesigned coincidences across the works of several writers.

The existence of undesigned coincidences is thus good evidence that an account is not an invented, fictional account. It would be virtually impossible for a human author to include a significant number of undesigned coincidences in a narrative; it would be even more difficult for a group of different authors to do this and more difficult still for a creative community to insert undesigned coincidences in a growing legendary narrative.

One only finds undesigned coincidences in accurate accounts of factual events made by independent witnesses. The existence of such coincidences in the Bible shows that the Bible accounts are factual and that they are accurately reported.

The second point about undesigned coincidences is that they are evidence of the preservation of the accounts in which they are embedded. If an account of an event has been passed on from one generation to another and has been altered in the process then the main point of the narrative may very well be preserved, but the insignificant details would tend to be lost or altered. If the account is altered or poorly preserved the coincidences would be absent. The presence of undesigned coincidences in the Gospel accounts is therefore good evidence that the narrative was not passed on to other generations by any method which would distort the account.

Similarly if the manuscripts of the Bible were copied badly, or deliberately distorted then one would expect undesigned coincidences to be lost early on in the process. Undesigned coincidences show that the gospels have been copied with considerable accuracy over the centuries and that the message contained in them has not been altered.

The existence of undesigned coincidences in the Gospel narratives does not, of itself, prove that the Gospels are inspired by God. What they do show is that the modern Gospel records (the ones used to construct the coincidences in this account) are accurate descriptions of the events they describe.

The existence of undesigned coincidences in the Gospels is therefore important evidence about the accuracy and reality of the accounts contained in them. The coincidences confirm that the accounts are detailed and accurate representations of the events that took place and hence can be trusted as a guide to the teaching of Jesus.

1.2 Definition of an Undesigned Coincidence

In order to discuss undesigned coincidences it is useful to have a detailed definition of what a coincidence is. For a correspondence of detail between two narratives to be considered as an undesigned coincidence it should have the following properties:-

Insignificance:

The detail which forms the basis of the coincidence must be generally insignificant in all the accounts in which it appears. If the detail is sufficiently insignificant it would be unnoticed by other writers who might be attempting to write a corroborating account.

Thus, in the account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand it is frequently noted that there was much grass in the place where the feeding took place (see coincidence 3.2 below). The reference to grass is clearly insignificant. Were it to be omitted from the accounts there would be no difference at all to the flow of the narrative. The detail of the bread and the cup at the Last Supper is not insignificant; it is an important element of the narrative and one of the main points taken away by the early christians.

Insignificance is often noticed by comparing different translations. In some translations the insignificant details are missing from the text. For example, the fact that the room of the Last Supper was upstairs is included in English translations but does not appear in the main translations into Albanian or Macedonian.

Independence:

The two accounts must show signs of independence. If they simply repeat one another's words one could have copied the detail from the other, or they both may have copied it from a common verbal source.

The accounts of the Feeding of the Five Thousand refer to grass on the ground (see coincidence 3.2 below) these vary slightly in wording, which indicates at least some independence. Only Mark includes the picture of the grass as "green". The fact that the miracle took place close to the Passover is unconnected with this and is only mentioned in John's account. This is the main source of independence in this coincidence, and the independence between the account in John and that in Mark is very clear; the wording of the two differs and the detail of the time at which the miracle took place would not immediately suggest grass.

Agreement:

The details must, of course, agree. The agreement will rarely be a major point; it may need digging for, but nevertheless the agreement must stand out when it is seen. The details must produce a picture of some underlying fact which is completely incidental to the main story.

The agreement between the time of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the presence of green grass is clear as soon as one realises the particular circumstances of growing grass in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, this is a hidden agreement which has no connection with the main story.

1.3 Classification of Undesigned Coincidences

Even though an undesigned coincidence may have all the required features, some will have them to a higher degree than others. The coincidences can thus be graded into four categories. These are indicated in the accounts that follow by a star system, placed in the title of each coincidence. The four categories are:-

Strong ****

The point of the undesigned coincidence is completely insignificant and the accounts are clearly independent. In spite of this the agreement between the different accounts is both exact and hidden. A strong coincidence can only be accounted for if the writer has accurate detailed evidence, has recorded it accurately, and the document in which it was recorded has then been transmitted accurately to the present day.

Example of a Strong Coincidence

Coincidence 3.2 concerns the grass which was growing at the time of the feeding of the 5,000. This grass is mentioned in three Gospels, but is omitted from one, which shows that it is an insignificant detail - its omission does not affect the story. The grass only grows at Passover time and John's gospel confirms that this was the time of the miracle, a point sufficiently insignificant to have been noted by the other Gospel writers. The requirements of insignificance, independence and harmony are thus all present in the coincidence.

Significant ***

The undesigned coincidence is almost as clear as in the Strong category, but either the detail is not quite as insignificant as one would hope, or there is a possibility of dependence within the narratives, or the correspondence could have arisen from a source other than the coincidence.

Example of a Significant Coincidence

Coincidence 2.2 is a significant coincidence. It explains why the water jars involved in the miracle of turning water into wine were empty at the start of the miracle by noting that the wedding feast had already started and that it was the religious custom to wash before eating. This is not quite a strong coincidence because the hidden story of the emptying of water pots at the start of a feast would have been familiar to anyone in the region before 70AD. There is thus a slight flaw in what might otherwise have been a strong coincidence.

Likely **

A likely coincidence is an apparently undesigned coincidence in which there is a flaw in the evidence so that it is not certain that the coincidence really exists.

Example of a Likely Coincidence

Coincidence 2.4 is about the way that the disciple Matthew is described differently in the Gospel of Matthew from the way that he is referred to in the other Gospel records. This can be put down to modesty on the part of Matthew who downgrades his importance when he writes about himself. There may, in fact, be some other, unknown, reason for this difference in the way that Matthew is referred to.

Weak *

A coincidence is weak if one or more of the elements that make it up is uncertain to a point which may render the coincidence untenable. The coincidences which are rated weak are generally attractive and are quite possibly correct, but are generally unprovable.

Example of a Weak Coincidence.

An example of a weak coincidence is coincidence 4.5, which refers to a boat (AV ship) which was habitually used by Jesus for travelling on the Sea of Galilee. The problem with this coincidence is that it depends on the use of the definite article in Greek, a notoriously difficult piece of Greek grammar to understand and full of subtlety. Because of this it is difficult to decide whether many of the passages involved in this coincidence refer to the same boat or to a different boat, thus lessening the confidence with which the coincidence should be treated.

1.4 Statistical Summary of the Coincidences.

Chapter of coincidence	Category				Total
	1	2	3	4	
2. Early	0	1	4	4	9
3. Middle	0	3	3	4	10
4. Later	2	2	1	3	8
5. Last Passover	0	1	5	11	17
Full Set	2	7	13	22	44

This table gives the set of undesigned coincidences (excluding the six sub-coincidences). The coincidences listed are the ones noted below in the following chapters. They are

categorised by the chapter in which they occur (these chapters correspond roughly to the period of Jesus' ministry in which the coincidence occurred. They are also categorised by their grade using the grading system outlined above. In total 35 of the coincidences are of the highest quality (grades "Strong" and "Significant"). This shows a considerable degree of hidden correspondence in the accounts, which argues strongly for their accuracy.

1.5 History of the Idea

The term "Undesigned Coincidence" was coined by J. J. Blunt whose book, published in 1847, was entitled "Undesigned Scriptural Coincidences". This book attempted to build on the earlier work of William Paley (the inventor of the Watchmaker argument about creation) who published a work by the name of "Horae Paulinae" in 1790. Blunt indicates that a number of undesigned coincidences in Acts and the Epistles were known before Paley wrote his work, systematising the ideas and adding many more coincidences.

There has been very little work in the area since that time. The majority of theologians have either ignored the idea completely or have simply relied on the work of Blunt. The emphasis among academic theologians has been to attempt to show a long term development of the Gospels in particular over several generations; undesigned coincidences are a serious problem for such theologians who have chosen to ignore the problem rather than to confront it.

However, the idea of undesigned coincidences has not gone away. This essay is an attempt to bring the idea to a wider notice.

1.6 Other Attempted Explanations for the Coincidences

The ideas of undesigned coincidences are not well known and as a consequence they are not thoroughly debated. There have been only a few attempts to explain away the coincidences and most of these have been based on a misapprehension of the meaning and method of undesigned coincidences. Here the four main counter-arguments are considered.

a) No Proof of Inspiration

The first argument used against undesigned coincidences is that they form no proof that the Bible comes from God. It is noted that while undesigned coincidences rarely if ever appear in fiction, they do appear in eyewitness accounts of all sorts of events, in historical research and in court cases. There are examples of undesigned coincidences which connect the works of Josephus (especially his history of the war of 66-73 AD between the Jews of Judea and Galilee and the Romans) with the Gospels. These coincidences provide no proof that Josephus was inspired by God.

The argument is, in essence correct. The undesigned coincidences idea doesn't attempt to prove that the Bible is inspired. All it attempts to show is that the Bible accounts are accurate representations of what happened. The coincidences with Josephus are generally geographic; they show that where both the Gospels and Josephus describe some village in Galilee in the first century AD that description is accurate.

As an example, there are several undesigned coincidences which surround the account of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. These don't, in themselves, establish that the Gospel writers were prompted by God to write the particular descriptions concerned. Other arguments are needed to show this. What the coincidences show is that the Gospel writers reported the events of the feeding of the Five Thousand accurately.

The undesigned coincidences establish that the Bible is written accurately. The coincidences which concern the Gospels, for example, show that the Gospels contain accurate accounts of the events they describe. However, some of these accounts are accounts of miracles performed by Jesus (the feeding of the five thousand is one of them). The undesigned coincidences therefore show that Jesus performed miracles, which does show the action of God through Jesus.

However, undesigned coincidences are not intended to provide direct evidence of inspiration. What they show is direct evidence of accuracy.

b) Attacks on Likelihood

Undesigned coincidences depend on the coincidences being unlikely. One counter-argument insists that in fact the coincidences are not as unlikely as are initially supposed.

This idea is used as a counter-argument to coincidence 3.4, where Luke indicates that the Feeding of the Five Thousand took place near Bethsaida and Jesus chooses Philip (whom John indicates as coming from Bethsaida) to ask about local conditions. The objection here is that three of the disciples came from Bethsaida. Thus, picking one out of the twelve at random gives a 25% chance of picking a disciple with connections to Bethsaida.

This, of course, heavily overestimates the likelihood. If the miracle is an invention, then it could have been placed near any one of hundreds of villages in Galilee. Many of these would not have had any disciples from nearby. Conservatively one might estimate a one in 25 probability of finding a village at random which came from near a disciple, and if the two probabilities were independent this would provide a probability of both coinciding close to 1%. However, the coincidence is still less likely as there is no need to mention a town at all and the writers didn't need to record that it was Philip who was asked the question. These make the probability of the coincidence arising at chance still lower. Thus the probability of choosing a disciple who came from Bethsaida is only high **if the miracle actually took place**.

The argument used to attack the idea of undesigned coincidences based on probability usually work by picking one relatively likely part of the coincidence and assigning it a probability which is high enough to make that part seem poor evidence and then to ignore the rest of the coincidence. When one attempts to estimate the probabilities of other necessary elements of the coincidence and combines the probabilities of all elements one generally finds a coincidence which is very unlikely.

An attempt to rebut the idea of undesigned coincidences by Cline (2009) goes so far as to attack any idea of probability on the grounds that only a single incident is involved in each coincidence. This, he says, makes the idea of probability meaningless. This, of course, is scraping the bottom of the philosophical barrel. The idea of probability is perfectly applicable to single events. Ever since the work of Thomas Bayes (1701-1761) one has been able to estimate probabilities for single events and the probability of a single event has had a perfectly sound meaning.

Of course it is usually impossible to give an estimate of the probability of any single coincidence with any degree of accuracy. However, one does not need to do this in order to know that the coincidence is in reality very unlikely.

c) Alteration by Later Scribes

A second objection to arguments based on undesigned coincidences is the idea that the coincidences were inserted into the narrative by later scribes who, having read the whole of all the Gospels, were prepared to add the coincidences into the narratives.

There are several issues here, but the most obvious is a lack of motive. Why should a second century scribe attempt to add an insignificant detail to a document in the hopes that it might be discovered 18 centuries later, but with a high probability that it will never be discovered at all.

A second point is that the details presented as undesigned coincidences are usually very obscure, which would make it difficult for a later scribe to insert them with any accuracy. There would need to be some extremely clever scribes who were so clear about the details of the narrative that they were able to devise details which appear completely independent of one another and then insert them into the text unnoticed by anyone else. Many of the coincidences appear in the text where no evidence of variation exists. This would mean that the scribe who invented the new detail would have had to persuade all the scribes in all the monasteries of the Roman empire and even outside it to make the required changes to their own manuscripts.

The scribe who invented an undesigned coincidence and copied it into his own manuscript would have to have been a genius of a high degree in order to think up the idea of the coincidence in the first place. He would also have had to have had the authority to change the text of manuscripts in other monasteries, and to do so even across language barriers (he would have to affect the content of ancient versions and citations in ancient books). This would require a high degree of determination on the part of the relevant ancient scribe and an amazing dedication as no manuscripts have been found which lack a significant portion of the undesigned coincidences in the Gospels.

d) A Prior Document

Another kind of attack on the idea of an undesigned coincidence, this time recorded in Babinsky (2011) is the idea that there is an underlying source for all the accounts which generates the coincidences.

This objection shows a misunderstanding of the nature of an undesigned coincidence. Babinsky seems to think that an undesigned coincidence is a situation where some element of the narrative exists in one account but is absent from another; in reality it is much more than this. An undesigned coincidence needs to be a trivial detail that would be unnoticed in the narrative unless one were deliberately looking for it. If the detail is of some significance in only one of the narratives, then it becomes a sub-coincidence, of interest in determining the way that the writer worked but no longer a guarantee of accuracy.

Some coincidences are within a single document; the details were written by the same writer each time, but are so incidental and so insignificant that it is unlikely that the writer would have invented them. The problem for this objection is that the author of the original (underlying) document would find it almost impossible to devise the undesigned coincidences within that document, and certainly not worth the effort.

Babinsky's theory requires that there is a single underlying document which contains all the narratives in the Gospels and is written in great detail. His idea is that the Gospels we know now are accounts taken from this hypothetical document, and that undesigned coincidences exist because the writers of Matthew, Mark and Luke effectively took different subsets from the hypothetical document.

There are several problems with this idea.

First, there is the problem that several undesigned coincidences include John as well as the synoptic Gospels. This means that the hypothetical underlying super-Gospel would have to have included the material of John as well as that of the synoptics. This leaves a problem in explaining why the Synoptics are so similar to one another and so different from John.

There is also a second problem of discovering what happened to this hypothetical document. No trace of it remains, no manuscript, no citations, no discussion. There is no mention of it at all in any writer from the end of the first century onwards. One might have expected that it would have been so important that the church would have worked hard to preserve it in some form; apparently this is not so.

A third point is that the underlying Super-Gospel would have to be earlier than the existing Gospels and extremely detailed. It would need to contain all the details that are found in the undesigned coincidences below, the details for many other coincidences that have not yet been discovered (and may never be) and still more details that were not reported in the Gospels we know. This document would have had to have been written early enough for there to have been eyewitnesses still alive. It would therefore need to have been accurate, or the eyewitnesses would have complained about it and, given the number of opponents to the early Christian movement, their objections would have become known. The idea that there was a large Super-Gospel of tremendous accurate detail available to Gospel writers in different parts of the Roman Empire would mean that the Gospels we have are dependent on a highly accurate document even closer to the events than they are themselves. This would improve one's confidence in the accuracy of the known Gospels rather than detract from it.

Babinsky seems to be arguing that the Gospel of Mark forms this hypothetical Super-Gospel but this is clearly nonsense. A majority of undesigned coincidences include details that are absent from Mark; Mark could hardly be the source of these details.

Summary

The current objections to undesigned coincidences fail because the writers of the objections don't understand the idea of an undesigned coincidence and aren't aware of more than a few of them. The objections seen on the internet seem to be [failed] attempts to account for a very small subset of the coincidences (the problem of Jesus' blindfold as he was tormented and the fact that Philip came from Bethsaida). The real picture of undesigned coincidences is much more than this and forms a set of problems which has essentially never been tackled by conventional critics.

It might be possible for a scribe who was an excellent scholar to invent an undesigned coincidence. This would take a considerable effort and probably more knowledge of the time and place than would have been available after the end of the Jewish War of 66-72AD. This would mean that the existence of undesigned coincidences in the Gospels would be a guarantee that the Gospels were written in living memory of the events that are described in them. If they were inaccurate then the living witnesses to the events would have been expected to have objected to them. This would have included not only followers of Jesus who were concerned to produce an accurate record of his doings, but also hostile witnesses such as the Jewish authorities and more political elements such as the Herodians. The absence of any mention of the Gospels in their literature suggests that they did not wish attention to be drawn to them.

It would also be uneconomic for writers to insert undesigned coincidences into the accounts. A tremendous amount of time and effort would have been needed to produce even one undesigned coincidence, let alone the large number of coincidences found in the Gospels. Only a small proportion of existing coincidences will probably ever be discovered; virtually none were known before the eighteenth century (when increasing scepticism caused an increased study of evidence for the way that the Gospels were written). It is difficult to imagine why a scribe in the first century AD would spend many hours, or even days, working on an undesigned coincidence which no-one would think about until the eighteenth century and which would probably not be discovered even then.

One can therefore only conclude that undesigned coincidences are good evidence that the narratives which contain them are accurate records of actual events and contain even small details to a high degree of accuracy.

1.7 Sub-Coincidences

A sub-coincidence is similar to an undesigned coincidence, but it covers details which may be minor in one witness but are a significant part of the narrative in another witness. These are interesting because they show consistency of narrative, but they do not have the force of a proper undesigned coincidence as it might just be possible for an astute author to invent them.

These notes list a mere five sub-coincidences. There are almost certainly far more of these, but they have not been a major element of study from many people. The point of sub-coincidences is that they show that the Gospels are more similar than the critics tend to presume.

Luke, for example, includes oblique references to visits made by Jesus to Jerusalem before the last passover. This destroys one of the criticisms of the Gospels, which is that they do not contain a common picture of whether Jesus visited Jerusalem during his ministry many times or only once. Looking at Luke's Gospel one can see that Jesus must have visited more times than the Gospel writer has need to include in the account.

1.8 Alleged Contradictions

The opposite of an undesigned coincidence would be a contradiction of detail or fact between two parallel accounts or two different parts of the same account. A small number of such contradictions have been proposed; a search on the internet will soon produce an apparently impressive list of these.

One point about these alleged contradictions is that they are frequently rather less than impressive and can frequently be dismissed after a very simple analysis. This means that the number of real problems in harmonising the Gospels is really very small. In many cases the apparent discrepancy is explained by a further small detail, and the alleged contradiction turns out, in reality, to be another undesigned coincidence.

Other alleged contradictions are not contradictions in the text of the Bible at all, but are contradictions between the Bible and the world-view of the person who proposes the contradiction.

However, even a small number of unresolved contradictions of detail shouldn't prove to be a problem in accepting the general reliability of the Gospels. The alleged contradictions may remain unresolved because they rely on a third fact to reconcile them, which is not recorded, or they may remain unresolved because insufficient research has been carried out to resolve them.

As an example, consider two witnesses to a car crash between a van which emerged from Wardle Road onto Marsland road and collided with a car. One witness may say that he saw an accident happen on Wardle Road when a maroon transit hit a grey Volkswagen. A second witness might testify to a crash on Marsland Road between a red van and a silver car. One would consider this to be a contradiction of detail unless one was aware of the geography of the area in which the accident took place; the real accident took place at the junction between the two roads and the colours of the vehicles are simply alternative descriptions of the same colour. The identity of a transit with a van and the Volkswagen with the car might also require a knowledge of modes of transport in the early 21st century. If these facts were not known, one might decide that a genuinely harmonious account contained several contradictions.

The idea of contradictions between parallel accounts is a significant issue in establishing the truth of those accounts. Because both undesigned coincidences and alleged contradictions deal with similar issues from opposite sides there is a short section on alleged contradictions between Gospel accounts at the end of these notes.

The next sections of these notes are examples of undesigned coincidences from the Gospels. They are written in approximately the order in which the events must have occurred in Jesus' ministry, and divided into four sections:-

- Chapter 2: Early Coincidences: Coincidences from the early part of Jesus' ministry
- Chapter 3: Middle Coincidences: Coincidences from the middle period of Jesus' ministry. Many of these are around the account of the feeding of the five thousand, which is recorded in all four gospels and is therefore a particularly rich field for finding undesigned coincidences.
- Chapter 4: Later Coincidences: Coincidences from the period of Jesus' ministry which works up towards his crucifixion and resurrection
- Chapter 5: The Last Passover: Coincidences from the week in Jerusalem which ended in the crucifixion of Jesus on Passover Eve and subsequent events.