

## 2. Coincidences from Early in Jesus' Ministry

### 2.1 The Call of the Four Disciples \*\*\*

The disciples appear to have been called more than once; presumably they signed up for short tours early on and then became more permanent. However, there is one incident in which Simon-Peter, Andrew, James and John were called by the Sea of Galilee. This is recorded in Matthew 4:18-22 and Luke 5:1-11.

There are differences between the two accounts. In Luke 5 the call follows a miraculous catch of fish. In Matthew Jesus finds the disciples on the lake shore and calls them there. However, there are common details which indicate that the same occasion is being described. Both take place on the shore of Galilee (Matthew 4:13 indicates that the incident occurred near Capernaum). They both involve the same disciples. On both occasions Jesus says "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." (Matthew 4:19 - there is a similar wording in Luke 5:10). The sequence of events would seem to be:-

- Jesus borrows Peter's boat from which to teach (Luke 5:3)
- The miraculous catch of fishes (Luke 5:4-9)
- Jesus speaks to Peter, but then leaves (Luke 5:10 - the leaving is implied)
- Jesus returns to find the future disciples on the lake shore, involved in activities associated with fishing (Matthew 4:18)
- The disciples are finally called by Jesus (Matthew 4:19-22)

There is considerable variation between the two accounts; this shows that they are independent of one another. Some critics have seen them as being so independent that they claim the two contradict one another, but the two accounts easily fit together.

The main substance of the coincidence involves the nets. In Luke 5:6 the nets are let down to catch fish and tear because so many fish are caught. In Matthew 4:21 Jesus returns to the shore to find James and John *mending their nets*. This would be necessary because of the tear caused on the previous evening. This is a tiny detail in Matthew 4 which is accounted for by circumstances in Luke 5.

Matthew makes no mention of the miraculous catch. However, the disciples are quite happy to leave their nets and follow Jesus. This would be a little odd in ordinary circumstances, but is accounted for by the fact that the disciples had seen the miracle.

**Comment:** This coincidence has considerable attraction in that there is clear and obvious independence of the two accounts. However, while it is likely, it is not guaranteed that they occur on consecutive days. The disciples could just possibly be mending nets from ordinary wear-and-tear. On the other hand, the sequence above is very likely. This indicates a stronger coincidence. The coincidence is therefore rated "Significant".

**Source:** Blunt p244 ff

### 2.2 Water into Wine \*\*\*

The first part of John 2 contains an account of one of Jesus' first miracles (the first sign that here performed in Cana). The miracle took place at a wedding party to which Jesus and some of his disciples were invited. During the wedding the wine ran out. There were present some stone jars used to hold water for Jewish purification rites. Jesus then asked that these should be filled with water; when the servants poured some out again it had become high quality wine.

The particular coincidence here is that Jesus began the miracle by asking the servants to fill the jars with water:-

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.  
(John 2:7)

This means that the jars must have been empty when the wine ran out, which means that the water in them must have been used already. John does not explain why.

However, Mark's Gospel does provide an explanation:-

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders...  
(Mark 7:3)

As the feast had been going on for some time, the guests must have been eating. Mark tells us that they would always wash before meals, and this was the purpose of the water in the water jars. The jars were thus emptied at the beginning of the feast and so needed to be refilled before Jesus could turn the water into wine.

**Comment:** The coincidence depends on a detail of Jewish behaviour which is described in a different context in Mark but is not described in John. The narrative of John's Gospel assumes that the ritual described in Mark had been carried out. John makes no mention of the fact that the ritual had taken place, which shows that he did not deliberately introduce it to the narrative. Mark, of course, does not report this miracle at all. The two passages are therefore independent of one another.

The only possible source of weakness in the coincidence is if the readers of John's Gospel were so familiar with similar feasts that they were used to the empty water pots. This seems unlikely as Mark has to describe Jewish custom in the matter and John has to explain the purpose of the water jars. The matter is passed so incidentally that it is unlikely to be a deliberate feature of the narrative. It can therefore be assigned the status "Significant".

**Source:** Blunt p286

### 2.3 Jesus Moves to Capernaum \*\*\*\*

This is a short coincidence but nevertheless a significant one. The Gospel of Luke contains passages which indicate that Jesus spent a considerable time in the vicinity of Capernaum and that he was well known there, especially his miracles and his teaching.

For example:-

And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your home town as well."  
(Luke 4:23)

This implies that Jesus did many things in Capernaum and that this was particularly well known. The other passage is in Luke 10; this is part of a list of towns in Galilee where Jesus was well known, including Chorazin and Bethsaida as well as Capernaum. However, in this list Capernaum is particularly emphasised. In this passage the inhabitants of the town are condemned because they failed to listen to the Gospel when it was proclaimed to them.

The implication is that for a considerable part of his ministry Jesus was based in Capernaum.

A similar story appears when one considers the Gospel of Mark. For example, consider these verses:-

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. (Mark 2:1)

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them,... (Mark 9:33)

These refer to Jesus having a “home” (Greek οἶκος [*oikos*]) in Capernaum. Again the implication is that Jesus had settled there on a semi-permanent basis, using it as a base from which to go out on tours of the region to proclaim the Gospel.

John’s Gospel is slightly more forthcoming. There is a verse in John 2 which tells us that Jesus and his family went down to Capernaum, but this could have been a short visit only.

After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days. (John 2:12)

This passage indicates a move to Capernaum, but soon after Jesus went on a visit to Jerusalem and it is unclear whether he settled in Capernaum on a more permanent basis. Another reference to Capernaum in John’s Gospel indicates that Jesus returned there after the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:17) with the suggestion that this was a natural place to which he and the disciples might return. After the miracle, when Jesus had escaped the crowd, some of them came to Capernaum to look for him there; again, this suggests that it was a habitual base for Jesus.

So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. (John 6:24)

No passage in any of these three Gospels (Mark, Luke and John) states explicitly that Jesus had settled in Capernaum as his main base. This is something that one can infer from the frequent references to Capernaum in these Gospels, but it is simply not an important enough detail for them to mention it explicitly.

However, in Matthew’s Gospel there is a more explicit statement:-

12 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee.

13 And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali (Matthew 4:12,13)

This tells us that Jesus left Nazareth after the death of John the Baptist and made Capernaum his home instead. A detail that is inferred from hints in three Gospel records is found as an explicit statement, albeit a very minor one, in the Gospel of Matthew.

**Comment:** This is a compelling coincidence. Clearly the place of Jesus’ base is relatively unimportant in the Gospel accounts; three of the Gospels choose not to refer to it as such. However, there is a faint hint in several passages in three Gospels which indicates that Capernaum was Jesus’ main base and a passing statement in Matthew which indicates that

Jesus made Capernaum his home. This shows all the points of irrelevance, independence and insignificance that one could look for in an undesigned coincidence. It should therefore be rated as “Strong”.

**Source:** Blunt p271, extended by JCT

#### **2.4 Secret Disciples in Jerusalem \*\*\*\***

While the main opposition to Jesus came from Jerusalem, he did have a following of secret disciples there. At Jesus’ first Passover in Jerusalem many of those in Jerusalem believed on him:-

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. (John 2:23)

Among these were some of the ruling elite in Jerusalem. Shortly after the Passover Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus by night. When he arrives he addresses Jesus like this:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” (John 3:2)

This verse shows Nicodemus to be a spokesman for a number of other people (he uses the phrase “we know”). There must have been a party among the leading elements of Jerusalem who considered Jesus to have been a great teacher from God.

Later on a large party of teachers came from Jerusalem to listen to the teaching of Jesus. This is the situation in Luke 5, where so many of these people have come to hear Jesus that it is impossible for a paralysed man to enter the house where Jesus is teaching. They are forced to let him down through the roof instead. The start of the account in Luke’s Gospel identifies the crowd who listened in the house:-

On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem... (Luke 5:17)

Only Luke tells us who these people were; the other accounts omit this detail, which shows that it is insignificant.

The confidence in Jesus of this essentially Pharisaic group ebbed away as Jesus’ ministry proceeded, but there is a final attempt to form some kind of alliance with him in Matthew 15:1-14. Here we read first that the Pharisees have come from Jerusalem (Mt 15:1); the reason for their visit was likely to be more than simply to sound out Jesus’ teaching on ritual cleanliness at mealtimes. However, Jesus will not trust himself to a party within the ruling elite. (See John 2:24) In Matthew 15:12 we find that the officers were offended (Greek: *skandaliso*) by the behaviour and teaching of Jesus

**Comment:** The account of the secret disciples is never a major theme in the Gospels but remains hidden in the accounts. One suspects that there was a reason for this in the protection of these disciples from later persecution. However, there is a clear subtext in the detail. This is a strong coincidence.

**Source:** JCT

## 2.5 Matthew in the Disciples List \*\*

Matthew is found in the lists of disciples in Matthew 10:2-4, Mark 3:16-19 and Luke 6:14-16. However, the position he enjoys in the list in the Gospel of Matthew differs with the position in the other Gospels in which the list is found.

In Matthew 10:3 the order is Thomas then Matthew, who it describes as “the tax collector”. Mark 3:18 and Luke 6:15 place these in the other order, with Matthew first, and omit any mention of Matthew’s job. Being a tax collector was, at the time, considered to be a disreputable career, and the more important positions were always earlier in a list. Thus Matthew’s Gospel downgrades the importance of Matthew relative to his position in the other lists.

Blunt suggests that Matthew would be likely to downplay his importance in the disciple lists due to his natural modesty. This change in the order of disciples in the list is considered to be evidence of a connection between Matthew and the Gospel that bears his name.

**Comment:** The idea of Matthew downgrading his own position in the list of disciples is fairly appealing, but presumes that there was no other reason for this particular downgrading. The coincidence can thus be classified as “Likely”.

**Source:** Blunt p 258

## 2.6 Peter’s Wife \*\*\*\*

This coincidence connects the Gospels with the Epistles of Paul. There are two references where the text refers to the wife of Simon Peter:-

14 And when Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying sick with a fever.  
(Matthew 8:14)

The fact that Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law indicates, obliquely, that Peter had a wife. Paul refers to Peter’s wife more explicitly, but still in passing:-

5 Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?  
(1 Corinthians 9:5)

In this passage Peter is picked out by the name “Cephas”; he is described as travelling with a “believing wife”. (she had reason to believe - Jesus had healed her mother).

In both passages the married statement of Peter is incidental to the story. In Matthew she is not even mentioned; her existence is inferred from the existence of her mother. The accounts are also clearly independent of one another; they do not even use the same name for Peter.

**Comment:** This also is an example of a very powerful coincidence. There is no doubt of the independence of the two sources; Paul’s epistles have little direct contact with the Gospel records and especially the Gospel of Matthew. The independence is highlighted by the way that Peter is referred to by a different name in both parts and the way that the wife’s mother is purely incidental. The only serious explanation of this is that Peter really had a wife and that the Gospel record is accurate. This coincidence can be graded “Strong”.

**Source:** Blunt p254

## 2.7 Evening Healing \*\*\*

In Matthew 8:16 there is a brief account of Jesus healing a large number of people in the evening. This is parallel to accounts of the same incident in Mark 1:32 and Luke 4:40. All three Gospels note that the incident took place in the evening, but they use different words to indicate this:-

Matthew 8:16	That evening they brought to him...
Mark 1:32	That evening at sundown...
Luke 4:40	Now when the sun was setting,...

The use of these different phrases indicates that the accounts are independent of one another; dependent accounts would have taken variants of the same phrase, rather than three completely different phrases.

The reason for the healing being in the evening is given in the context. A few verses earlier (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31) the narrative tells us that the preceding events were on the Sabbath day. Jewish days end at sunset, and hence the healings took place immediately after the end of the Sabbath day. Luke 13:14 tells us that conventional Jewish interpretation of the Law of Moses forbade the healing of an ill person on the Sabbath day. This is why the crowd waited until the evening before presenting themselves to be healed.

**Comment:** This is a strong coincidence from Matthew's point of view. Matthew reports the incident without comment. Nevertheless the explanation for the wait is there in the other synoptic Gospels. This suggests that Matthew is reporting observed detail rather than making up the incident or writing it from a faulty vague source. The coincidence can thus be rated "Significant".

**Source:** Blunt p255

## 2.8 Matthew's House \*\*\*\*

The call of Matthew to be a disciple of Jesus is recorded in Matthew 9:9,10. At this point he is sitting in his tax office in Capernaum. After Matthew decided to become one of Jesus' disciples there was a great feast. Matthew describes this as being in "The house" (In Greek "τῆ οἰκίᾳ"). The other Gospels record that this was Matthew's own house:-

"Now it happened, as he was dining in Levi's house..." (Mark 2:15)

"Then Levi gave him a great feast in his own house." (Luke 5:29)

In Mark and Luke the house needs special identification; it is Levi's house (Levi was Matthew's other name). However, to Matthew, it is "the house"; it is his own special house. This turn of speech shows a connection between Matthew the tax collector and the writer of the Gospel of Matthew.

This point is reinforced by the detail that many of those who were present at the feast were themselves tax collectors. The records of this are:-

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"  
(Matthew 9:10,11)

And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

(Mark 2:16)

And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.

(Luke 5:29)

This would be natural as many of Matthew's friends would be in the same line of business as him.

The detail of Matthew's house continues through the Gospel of Matthew. His house is simply referred to as "the house":-

Matt 9:28 Jesus heals some blind men in the house.

Matt 13:1 Jesus leaves Matthew's house to go out and deliver the parable of the sower.

Matt 13:36 Jesus returns to Matthew's house to explain the parable.

Matt 17:25 Jesus discusses the paying of taxes with Peter in Matthew's house!

(Mark also refers to a house in Capernaum as "the house", but a comparison shows that this is a different house. Probably the house mentioned thus in Mark is Peter's house.)

**Archaeological confirmation:** Capernaum was the first town of any size on the Antipas side of the boundary between the territories of Herod Antipas and Herod Philip; it was also on the Via Maris, one of the main trade routes of the ancient world. As such it was a prime site for a customs post, which was one of the main types of tax office of the time. Matthew and his colleagues are in exactly the right place.

**Comment:** This is a strong coincidence. It contains the detail of the house which connects the Gospel of Matthew with Matthew the disciple. The additional point of the presence of tax collectors at the following feast helps to confirm this, as does the topographical point of the location of Capernaum.

**Source:** Blunt p257 extended by JCT

## 2.9 The Centurion's Servant and the Nobleman's Son \*\*\*

In the Gospel of Luke (Luke 7:1-10) a centurion in Capernaum sends messengers to Jesus with the request that one of the Centurion's servants should be healed. Jesus offers to come to the centurion's house, but the centurion indicates that Jesus should simply say a word, knowing that by this the servant will be healed. The centurion knows that the servant will be healed at a distance without need to put Jesus to any further trouble.

The question is how the centurion knew that Jesus had the ability to heal at a distance.

If the centurion followed the events in Capernaum he would have known that that Jesus was able to heal at a distance because he had done it before. In John 4:46-53 there is the account of Jesus healing a nobleman's son. At the time Jesus and the nobleman were in Cana in Galilee while the nobleman's son was in Capernaum, more than a day's walk away. The geography of the situation is established in verses 46 and 47:-

- 46 So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill.
- 47 When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.
- (John 4:46,47)

The healing at a distance is described in verses 50 and 51:-

- 50 Jesus said to him, "Go; your son will live." The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way.
- 51 As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering.
- (John 4:50,51)

This healing was unusual and shows the power of Jesus in a remarkable way. It would have been noted immediately in Capernaum, where the healing took place, and would have been talked of. The centurion was a part of the Capernaum community, even to the point of paying for a synagogue (Luke 7:5); one can be certain that he took an interest in local affairs. This is why he could have confidence that Jesus was able to heal his servant at a word and at a distance.

**Comment:** This is an appealing coincidence and the details fit together amazingly well. The accounts are independent; the account of the healing at a distance in John differs in every detail from the healing of the centurion's servant in Matthew and Luke. The details are insignificant; the fact of the connection between the centurion and the local community by endowing a synagogue is only in Luke, not in Matthew and the miracle from Cana is only mentioned in John. However, it is possible that the centurion would work out that Jesus could heal at a distance by sheer faith and logic; for this reason the coincidence is graded "Significant".

**Source:** JCT