

3. Middle Coincidences

This set of undesigned coincidences is from early on in Jesus' ministry, but after the first few months. A large number of the coincidences in this section are based around the Feeding of the Five Thousand, but there are a few additional ones.

The Feeding of the 5000

The feeding of the Five Thousand is unusual in that it is recorded in all four Gospels. As such there is considerable scope for undesigned coincidences. There is also a convenient comparison in the feeding of the four thousand, a similar incident but one which is distinct from the feeding of the five thousand. There would be much scope for confusion between the accounts of the two incidents and if the reporting of either account had been poor one would have expected more similarity between the recorded details of the accounts of the two incidents and less correspondence in parallel accounts of the same incident.

3.1 The Baskets ****

After the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand the disciples took up twelve baskets of scraps (Matthew 14:20; Mark 6:43; Luke 9:17; John 6:13). After the feeding of the four thousand a similar collection of scraps into baskets took place (Matthew 15:37; Mark 8:8).

The detail of note in these accounts is the Greek word which is translated "basket". In the feeding of the five thousand the word is *κοφίνους* (*kofinous*) while in the feeding of the four thousand the word is *σπυρίδας* (*spuridas*). These are words which designate different kinds of basket. The precise details of what these baskets were like is now forgotten but the evangelists make a clear distinction between them. The accounts of the feeding of the five thousand always refer to the *kofinous* and the accounts of the feeding of the four thousand always refer to the *spurida*. If the accounts had been invented, or if there had been any loss of detail in the memory of the events then the two types of basket would almost certainly have become confused.

Comment: This coincidence appears in all four accounts. It shows a similarity within the accounts of the different incidents and a distinction between accounts of different events. The coincidence can be graded "Strong".

Source: Blunt p264

3.2 The Grass ****

Three of the four accounts of the feeding of the five thousand mention that the ground was covered in grass. (Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:39; John 6:10) In the corresponding places in the account of the feeding of the four thousand the word "ground" is used instead (Matthew 15:35; Mark 8:6). This shows a simple detail which shows a correspondence between accounts of the same event but a distinction between accounts of similar but different events.

However, there is more. In the eastern Mediterranean grass tends to be found only in the spring (unless there is serious irrigation). Before the spring the grass doesn't grow, and from the later part of spring onwards the heat tends to burn it and cause it to go brown. The existence of green grass on the ground indicates that the miracle of the five thousand took place in the spring. This matches the detail in John 6:4 which tells us that the miracle took place near to Passover time, which is, of course, in the early spring.

Comment: Again, this is a trivial detail that would be highly unlikely to spring to mind among the evangelists if the account was an invention. The fact of the time of year is only mentioned in one account, but the consequences appear in three of the accounts. Luke, who would have the account at second hand, does not include the detail. This coincidence can be graded “Strong”.

Source: Blunt p264

3.3 Women and Children ****

At the feeding of the five thousand Jesus has the disciples ask the people to sit down (John 6:10). He uses the word *ἀνθρώπους* (*anthropous*) which refers to people of either sex. However, only the men (Greek *ἄνδρες* - *andres*) actually sit; the women and children continue to mill around. Luke 9:14 tells us that the men sat down in groups of 50:-

14 For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.”

15 And they did so, and had them all sit down. (Luke 9:14,15)

It was therefore easy to count the men. It was, however, much more difficult to count the women and children. This is why Matthew 14 tells us the number of the men only.

And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

(Matthew 14:21)

The men were counted but the women and children were not.

Comment: The detail is trivial and would easily be overlooked. It is written in unconnected parts. It is John’s Gospel that notes that only the men sat down, Luke who notes that the men sat in ranks of 50 and Matthew who notes that the number of men is counted while the number of women is not. It would be impossible for three disparate writers to arrange this coincidence if it was not an accurate detail of something that really happened. This coincidence can be graded “Strong”.

Source: Blunt p264

3.4 Philip and Bethsaida ***

Immediately before the feeding of the five thousand we are told that Jesus addressed a question to Philip:

Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (John 6:5)

The detail in this coincidence is the reason that Jesus chose to ask Philip where bread could be obtained rather than one of the other disciples.

The reason that Jesus asks Philip is that Philip comes from Bethsaida.

Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter (John 1:44)

So far the coincidence only involves the Gospel of John. However, the Gospel of Luke tells us where the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand took place:-

On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. (Luke 9:10)

The place of the miracle was an unoccupied area not far from Bethsaida. This means that three of the disciples (Philip, Andrew and Peter) would have known the area; there would have been little point in asking one of the other disciples.

Comment: The details of this coincidence match extremely well, and it is a natural progression that Jesus should ask someone local to Bethsaida about the possibility of finding food near that town. The fact that three out of the twelve disciples are from Bethsaida must detract from the improbability of the coincidence; however, one must remember that it would have been possible for someone who was inventing the episode to place the episode near a town which had no local disciples. The coincidence can be graded “Significant”.

Source: Blunt p279

3.5 Whence the crowds? **

The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 begins when Jesus takes the disciples away into an uninhabited area (Mark 6:31). The reason for this was that there had been much coming and going at Capernaum and Jesus and his disciples had therefore had no time to themselves.

The question associated with this coincidence is why there should have been such crowds at Capernaum and why these were continually coming and going. The answer is given in John 6, which points out that “the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand” (John 6:4). The Passover was an enormous feast; enormous numbers of Jews would have travelled to Jerusalem for it and many of the Galilee contingent of these would pass through Capernaum, which was built on a major road, the Via Maris.

Comment: This is a significant undesigned coincidence, but not conclusive. Capernaum seems to have been busy on many days and not only at the feast of the passover. The coincidence can thus be graded no higher than “Likely”.

Source: Blunt p277

3.6 Barley Loaves **

At the feeding of the Five Thousand the multitude was fed from a small amount of food. Matthew 14:17, Mark 6:38 and Luke 9:13 all tell us that all the food available consisted of five loaves and two fish. John 6:9 tells us that the loaves were barley loaves:-

“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” (John 6:9)

This is an important detail as it provides yet another undesigned coincidence connected with the feeding of the 5,000.

We have already noted that according to John 6:4 the miracle took place close to Passover time. Passover was close to the Barley harvest; indeed one of the offerings at Passover was the first fruits of the barley; the firstfruits of wheat were offered at Pentecost (Deuteronomy 16:1,9). Barley bread was therefore especially common at Passover time, and the presence of this bread at the feeding of the five thousand is a confirmatory detail.

Comment: This is a good undesigned coincidence, but not one of major significance. There was no need to mention that the loaves were made of barley and this adds to the insignificance of the coincidence. However there might be other reasons why the loaves were barley loaves; the boy may simply have had a preference for barley bread or the family might have been too poor to afford wheat. The coincidence is thus graded as “Likely”.

Source: JCT

3.7 The Disciples and the Storm **

After the feeding of the 5000 Jesus sends away his disciples back to Capernaum by boat:-

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. (Mark 6:45)

This is quite a forceful action. The ESV says that Jesus “made” his disciples get into the boat; the AV says that he “constrained” them to do so. The Greek text has the word *anangkadzo* which indicates that they were compelled by Jesus to get into the boat.

The reason that they had to be compelled is given later on down the passage where we find that there was a storm brewing (Mark 6:48; John 6:18). This resulted in large waves and a difficult passage. As they were fishermen who were familiar with the conditions it is not difficult to see why the disciples were reluctant to enter the boat and sail out to sea in her.

However, there was a reason why they might trust Jesus to ensure that they would come to no harm. In Mark 4:35-41, Matthew 8:23-27 and Luke 8:22-25 there is an occasion in which Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee. This would no doubt have impressed itself on the minds of the disciples and would have made them less worried about setting off in the face of a contrary wind.

Comment: This is a minor coincidence and depends on the order of the two events. In Mark the calming of the storm is later than the feeding of the 5,000 but in Matthew and Luke it is earlier. There is thus a problem with the chronology. As none of the Gospels claims to have been written in chronological order we cannot be certain whether the order is right for the coincidence, although the order in which the calming of the storm comes earlier than the feeding of the 5000 seems more likely.

There is, of course, a small exhortation in the story. With Jesus in the boat the disciples are safe as he can calm the storm. Without Jesus they are tossed by the waves. This is hidden in the gospel records and is not a likely explanation for the story.

The fact that the account is so well hidden but brings out a story would assign it the status “Likely”.

Source: JCT

3.8 The Wind and the Boats ***

This coincidence follows on immediately after the feeding of the five thousand. It involves the miracle of Jesus walking on the water.

The feeding of the five thousand took place in a deserted place near Bethsaida (Luke 9:10).

Immediately afterwards Jesus sends the disciples off in the boat to Capernaum (Matthew 14:22). However, the disciples made little progress across the lake because of the wind and consequent waves (John 6:18). It was only after Jesus had joined the disciples, having walked on the water, that the boat was able to arrive at Capernaum. This indicates a very strong wind a little to the south of westerly.

Blunt suggests that many of these boats would have been fishing off Tiberias when they were caught by the wind and forced to run for shelter. This suggests a promontory or a cove in the place near the feeding of the five thousand where they could shelter.

As the evening progressed various boats arrived from Tiberias. These halted their progress near the site of the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:23). In the morning some of these boats came to Capernaum in a search for Jesus. When they found Jesus in Capernaum they were surprised. Their reaction is summarised in their question: “Rabbi, when did you come here?” (John 6:25b) Presumably they had expected to arrive at Capernaum and wait there for Jesus.

The question here is why the people from these boats were surprised by the presence of Jesus in Capernaum. Given that they had sailed from the vicinity of Tiberias to the desert place, why did they not suppose that Jesus had taken one of these Tiberian boats to Capernaum?

The answer comes in the force and direction of the wind. These were such that the boats could sail from Tiberias or Capernaum to the desert place but could not sail or even row against it in the opposite direction. The important point is stated in Matthew 14:24 which tells us that “The wind was against them.”

The same wind that hindered the disciples prevented the other boats from making the crossing. This detail is spread across two independent Gospels.

Comment: The details are independent of one another; the fact of the storm which made it difficult for the disciples to cross the lake is seen in two or three corroborative details in the accounts. This coincidence can be graded “Significant”.

Source: Blunt p291

3.9 Miracles Near Bethsaida ***

In Matthew 11 Jesus castigates the inhabitants of Bethsaida because they did not repent, in spite of the mighty works that were done in them.

“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. (Matthew 11:21)

However, there is no record in Matthew that any miracles were performed in Bethsaida at all. The word Bethsaida only appears once in Matthew, and there is no account of a miracle there. One miracle (the healing of a blind man) appears in Mark 8:22-26.

The set of miracles is described in Luke 9:1-6 where the twelve are sent out to teach, proclaim the Gospel and heal the sick. This campaign takes place in the region about Bethsaida as Luke 9:10 tells us that at the end of this campaign the twelve met Jesus in Bethsaida and in v11 Jesus heals inhabitants of Bethsaida himself. The episode ends with the feeding of the 5,000.

Thus there were numerous miracles around and in Bethsaida. The mystery raised in Matthew 11 is solved in Luke 9 with an account of a healing campaign by Jesus and the twelve disciples. This is a close tie-in between the two Gospels which could hardly have been invented.

Comment: This is a significant coincidence in that it has a reference in Matthew to miracles while miracles are mentioned in another gospel. However, it is possible that there were still other miracles carried out in the region of Bethsaida of which we know nothing, but of which Matthew was aware. This coincidence is graded “Significant”.

Source: WWW

3.10 The Baptist and the Pharisees ****

Luke tells us that in the early stages of Jesus’ ministry the people who had been baptized by John the Baptist were prepared to accept the teaching of Jesus. On the other hand, the Pharisees and lawyers, who were not baptised by John, rejected the teaching of Jesus.

- 29 (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John,
30 but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) (Luke 7:29,30)

The Baptismal campaign of John is mentioned in all four Gospels, but only with much detail in Matthew and Luke. However, only Matthew makes any mention of the Pharisees:-

- 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
8 Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.
9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.
10 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:7-10)

The Pharisees came to Jesus for baptism, but John rejected their request, calling them a “brood of vipers”. It is not explicit even in this account that John refused to baptise the Jewish religious establishment, but it is difficult to imagine a baptism taking place after this response from John. Thus we have not only the detail that the Pharisees were not baptised by John, but also why this led them to be so opposed to the message which John shared with Jesus.

The point is insignificant enough to be implied rather than written explicitly. Luke’s account of baptism by John includes the incident but doesn’t point out that it was the Pharisees who were the target of John’s anger. Clearly some of the multitude, having heard John were repentant and were baptised, but Luke doesn’t single out the Pharisees as unwilling to repent. It is only Matthew who identifies the Pharisees.

Comment: The correspondence between Matthew’s account of John’s baptismal campaign and the passage in Luke 7 is clear, but is ignored by the majority of commentators. Similarly, the fact of John’s rejection of the Pharisees is not sufficiently important to appear in Luke’s account. The coincidence thus has all the properties of independence, harmony and insignificance that grade this coincidence “Strong”.

Source: JCT