

4. Later Coincidences

4.1 Herod's Servants ****

In the Gospel of Matthew we find Herod discussing Jesus with his servants.

- 1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus,
- 2 and he said to his servants, "This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." (Matthew 14:1,2)

The important detail here is the fact that Herod discussed matters with his servants. It would be unusual for an eastern monarch at the time of Jesus to make conversation with his servants. The Roman world at this time was divided to an extreme degree between people of different social classes. A servant would be far below a king in social standing and a king would not normally discuss anything with any servant at all.

That the detail is trivial can be seen by looking at the parallel passages in Mark and Luke:

- 14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." (Mark 6:14)
- 7 Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead,
- 8 by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen.
- 9 Herod said, "John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?" And he sought to see him. (Luke 9:7-9)

This is the same incident and the same outcome appears, but in this case it is not recorded to whom Herod addresses his opinion. It is not, therefore, a vital part of the main thrust of the narrative that Herod was speaking to his servants.

The reason that Herod discusses Jesus with his servants is that the servants are likely to have special knowledge of Jesus. One of them had a particularly close relationship. This was Chuza, Herod's steward. Luke's Gospel records the reason.

- 1 Soon afterward he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him,
- 2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,
- 3 and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. (Luke 8:1-3)

The point is that one of the women who sometimes accompanied Jesus and his disciples was the wife of Herod's steward. As manager of the household, Chuza would be among Herod's servants. Hence we know that some of Herod's servants had considerable knowledge of Jesus. This is why Herod condescends to talk to his servants about Jesus.

Comment: This is a high grade undesigned coincidence. The fact that Herod's discussion was with the servants goes unrecorded in two Gospels even though those Gospels contain an account of Herod's saying during the incident. Only Matthew records that Herod discussed Jesus with his servants and only Luke records that Joanna was a close supporter of Jesus. The details are in different Gospels as well as being trivial. This coincidence can be graded "Strong".

Source: Blunt p263

4.2 The Disciples and Fasting ***

This is a coincidence which concerns another miracle of Jesus. It involves the healing of a demoniac. Initially the disciples fail to heal the man, but then Jesus steps in and the man is healed. When the disciples ask Jesus about their difficulty, Jesus replies that “This kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting.” (Matthew 17:21). The text here is uncertain; some manuscripts omit these words. The passage naturally leads to the inference that the disciples did not fast. This is confirmed by another passage in Matthew:

Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (Matthew 9:14)

The two passages both bring out the same incidental detail, that the disciples of Jesus did not fast. This is completely incidental to the narrative, which would qualify it as an undesigned coincidence.

Comment: This seems to be a very strong undesigned coincidence because of its extreme incidental nature. However, there is a problem in that it is unclear whether the words used are an original part of the text or not. The undesigned coincidence would tend to imply that the words really should be included in the narrative. The verse is included in a large number of witnesses, including f¹ and f¹³ as well as the Byzantine text, but it is absent from Aleph and B. In view of this the coincidence can only be graded “Significant”.

Source: Blunt p268

4.3 Jesus and the Samaritans **

There are various occasions on which Jesus travels through Samaria. One of these is recorded in Luke 9, where the Samaritans would not receive Jesus:-

- 51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.
 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him.
 53 But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.
 (Luke 9:51-53)

This incident shows the attitude of the Samaritans towards those who were attending feasts in Jerusalem and who generally seemed to be observant Jews. As Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for a feast the Samaritans refused to have anything to do with him.

However, in John 4 Jesus is received by the Samaritans and spends two days with the inhabitants of Sychar. There are two reasons for this unusual behaviour. First, there is the incident of the woman at the well of Samaria in the first half of John 4. The other reason is that Jesus was passing through Samaria in order to escape from the Judean religious establishment.

The first verses of John 4 include the statements:-

- 1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John...
 3 he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.
 4 And he had to pass through Samaria. (John 4:1,3-4)

This tells us that the popularity of Jesus had caused some unfavourable reaction from the Pharisees of Judea. Jesus was forced to leave Judea and travel by an unusual route back to

Galilee. The standard route was through Perea, on the East side of Jordan, but Jesus was compelled to take a different route; this indicates that there was some breach between Jesus and the Judean authorities. This disagreement between Jesus and the Jewish establishment disposes the Samaritans to be more friendly to Jesus.

Comment: This is an appealing coincidence which fits what is known of the relations between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus. However it is not certain that the analysis is wholly correct. The Samaritans may not have known about the trouble that Jesus had with the Pharisees and simply accepted Jesus on the word of the woman. The coincidence is thus graded “Likely”.

Source: Blunt p285

4.4 Jesus’ Brothers **

In Matthew 12 Jesus’ mother and brothers come to visit him:-

46 While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. (Matthew 12:46)

It is not even clear that the family of Jesus succeeded in talking to him. Certainly the reason for their visit is not given and the matter that they raised is not recorded. However in the next chapter (Matthew 13) we find that Jesus goes to his home.

54 and coming to his home town he taught them in their synagogue... (Matthew 13:54)

It is possible that the reason for Jesus family to visit him was to ask him to come home. It is certainly likely that whatever Jesus’ family communicated to him on this visit resulted in his visit to Nazareth.

Comment: This is a relatively weak coincidence. It is not necessarily the case that the two events are linked and Matthew’s Gospel may not be in chronological order. Nevertheless there is a possible link. The coincidence can be graded “Likely”.

source: Blunt p 259

4.5 The Ship *

There are several passages in the Gospels which refer to Jesus using a boat on the Sea of Galilee. These passages mention the vessel as “The ship” (τῷ πλοίῳ - *to ploion*) with the definite article. Such passages include: Matthew 4:21,22 and Luke 5:3. Blunt adds Matthew 13:2; Mark 3:9 and Luke 8:22 to these, but there appears to be no article in the Greek text.

Blunt states that this indicates that a particular boat was indicated, probably one which was owned by Zebedee, father of James and John. The idea is that Jesus was accustomed to use a particular craft.

Comment: Initially this looks like a convincing coincidence, but it depends on too many ambiguities to be certain. The coincidence depends on the use of the Greek definite article, which is notoriously difficult to tie down. It may be that the use of this article doesn’t indicate a single particular boat at all. In addition it is perfectly within the context of Mark 3 that the boat here was lent to Jesus only for the duration of the incident. Together these leave the coincidence with the status “Weak”.

Source: Blunt p261

4.6 The Death of Joseph ****

At the birth of Jesus there is a considerable mention of Joseph, the husband of Mary, in the narrative. Mary continues to appear in the Gospels at later times and even in Acts, but Joseph disappears from the record.

The last mention of Joseph in the Gospel record is in Luke 2:43, when Jesus visited Jerusalem for the passover at the age of 12 years. After this there are several mentions of the family of Jesus, but Joseph is noticeably absent.

“While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him.” (Matthew 12:46)

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” (Mark 6:3)

Then his mother and his brothers came to him... (Luke 8:19)

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)

These accounts mention different members of Jesus’ family, but they never mention Joseph at any time. Mark 6:3 gives a list of all the members of the family; Joseph should be the head of this family and hence mentioned first in the list, but he doesn’t appear there at all. Joseph is not present at the foot of the cross or at the wedding in Cana in Galilee. This is singular and implies that Joseph was not available.

There are two other passages which indicate the same idea.

In John 19:26-27, Jesus, who is dying on the cross, puts his mother into the care of John the disciple. This would make sense if Joseph was dead, but if Joseph had been alive he would either have been able to care for Mary himself or he would have also needed care. The fact that Joseph is not mentioned indicates that he is not available.

In Acts 1:13,14 we read that the “Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers” stayed on in Jerusalem, the implication being that they remained there for a considerable period of time (James was still there 38 years later when Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey). If Joseph had still been alive then one would have expected that either Mary would have returned to continue her family life with him or, more likely, that Joseph would have come with Jesus’ brothers to live in Jerusalem.

The obvious corollary of this is that Joseph, who had been alive when Jesus was twelve years old, had died before the start of Jesus’ ministry. There is no explicit statement of this, but it is a constant feature of the narratives across all four Gospel records and Acts.

Comment: The absence of Joseph is a constant in all the narratives, but it is an absence from the narratives rather than a single stated fact. Thus it is not something which could have been copied from a prior document and the accounts are independent of one another. However, the consistency of the accounts is impressive. This is good evidence that the different Gospel records are recording what actually took place. This coincidence can be graded “Strong”.

Source: Blunt p 260

4.7 The Death of Zebedee *

When Jesus first calls the disciples at the start of his ministry (eg Matthew 4:21), it is clear that Zebedee is alive. However, this is the only narrative in which Zebedee is demonstrably alive. The remaining references are to the “Sons of Zebedee”, which tells us little of the man himself. Towards the end of the gospel accounts one finds references to “the mother of Zebedee’s children”. In Matthew 20:20 it is “The mother of Zebedee’s children” who approaches Jesus with a request to increase the status of her sons, and in Matthew 27:55,56 “The mother of Zebedee’s children” is by the cross. This suggests that Zebedee was dead by the end of Jesus’ ministry.

It is not merely the absence of Zebedee from the narrative which suggests that Zebedee was dead, but the fact that his wife is called “The mother of Zebedee’s children” rather than “The wife of Zebedee”.

In Matthew 8:21 one of the disciples asks for leave to bury his father. This father could be Zebedee.

Comment: This is a much weaker coincidence than the death of Joseph. It is clear that the accounts do not concentrate on the death of Zebedee, but the reference to “the mother of Zebedee’s children may not necessarily indicate that she is his widow. If this is not the case, then the coincidence collapses. Similarly, one cannot show for definite that the disciple who wished to bury his father was one of the sons of Zebedee. The coincidence is thus plausible, but is short of proof. It has been graded “Weak”.

Source: Blunt p 249

4.8 Galilee and the Jews ****

On more than 52 occasions in John’s Gospel the phrase “The Jews” is used to refer to Jesus’ main opponents. All of these references refer to the Jerusalem religious establishment; the only references to the Jews in Galilee are neutral (the phrase “As was the custom of the Jews” is common). This indicates that the bulk of Jesus’ following was made up of Galileans.

There are various occasions where the division between Jesus’ general support in Galilee and his opposition among the political elite of Jerusalem appears:-

After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. (John 7:1)

In John 7:50-52 the main voices in the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem condemn Nicodemus for his support of Jesus with the words:-

52 They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” (John 7:52)

However the coincidence also appears in Matthew and Mark. Here Peter is in the courtyard of the high priest when he is accosted by a bystander:

After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” (Matthew 26:73)

The bystander knows by his accent that Peter is a Galilean, and thus assumes that he is a supporter of Jesus. The same occasion appears in Mark 14:70, which doesn't say how the bystander knew that Peter was a Galilean:

But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter,
"Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." (Mark 14:70)

Here the connection is explicit. Luke 22:59 is almost exactly the same.

Another place where the locals wrongly assume a connection between Jesus and the politics of the relationship between Judea and Galilee is:-

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose
blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. (Luke 13:1)

The point here is that the people presumed that Jesus, because of where he had been brought up, would have a political reaction to the event. Jesus had no such baggage, and said so, but the idea of a connection between Jesus and Galilee is clear.

Comment: This coincidence is not easy to discover even after an in-depth study of John's Gospel. In spite of this it refers to a detail which is confirmed by a number of passages. It is thus graded "Strong".

Source: JCT