

6. Sub-Coincidences

There are some passages which, in one Gospel, show all the hallmarks of an undesigned coincidence. In this Gospel the point of interest is insignificant to the point of being almost completely invisible and is essentially ignored by the writer of the Gospel as of no importance in the context in which it is written. When one looks at the other Gospel or Gospels in which the narrative appears it is a very major point.

The sub-coincidence thus has the following characteristics:-

- In one account [the minor account] the sub-coincidence is an insignificant detail which may need to be deduced from the text rather than being a major point in it.
- The writer makes no attempt to draw the attention of the reader to the insignificant detail.
- However, in another account [the major account] the same detail becomes a major element or even the main point of the narrative.

This means that the sub-coincidence is not a matter of a detail which both writers include as a matter of clear memory but without being more than an afterthought which shows the detailed memory of the writers. It is possible that a clever writer might include a sub-coincidence in the text by seeing a major theme in another account and incorporating it as a subtle hint in his own account. However it would be difficult for the writer of the minor account consciously to write such a detail into that account without drawing the attention of the reader to the detail.

The sub-coincidence does not demonstrate the accuracy of the text in the same way as a full undesigned coincidence. However, it does show that the major point in one account is supported by a much more muted witness in another account who takes it so much for granted that it is left only as a detail. Sub-coincidences also help to demonstrate the accurate copying of the minor text in which it is embedded; because the detail is insignificant in that text it would easily be removed by bad copying. The following are examples of sub-coincidences.

6.1 Luke and Jesus' visits to Jerusalem

John's Gospel contains a description of many of Jesus' visits to Jerusalem before the visit of the last Passover (at which he was crucified). Matthew and Mark contain no description of any visit to Jerusalem apart from the visit of the last supper. Luke has a number of details which indicate that Jesus visited Jerusalem before the last Passover. Here they are:-

- "Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house." (Luke 10:38) This occasion places Jesus at the house of Martha and Mary (see the next verse), which we know was in Bethany. Bethany was, of course, within very easy walking distance of Jerusalem. This passage therefore shows a visit of Jesus to Jerusalem which, for whatever reason, is not mentioned explicitly in Luke's Gospel.
- "There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices... Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them" (Luke 13:1,4 - read the first 8 verses of Luke 13 for further details.) This passage refers first to "Galileans", which implies that the incident did not happen in Galilee, and then to the tower in Siloam. Together these indicate that Jesus was in or near Jerusalem when the incident happened.

- “It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.” (Luke 13:34; read vv31-35 for the full account.) In these verses Jesus is warned that he is likely to be killed by Herod if he remains in Jerusalem and he pronounces on Jerusalem in verses 34 and 35. Again it is clear that a visit of Jesus to Jerusalem has occurred.
- “On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee.” (Luke 17:11) Here we have yet another occasion on which Jesus visited Jerusalem in the middle of his ministry.

Comment: These passages in Luke are insignificant details which confirm that Jesus did, indeed, visit Jerusalem on several occasions. However these visits form a considerable part of the narrative of John’s Gospel. It would therefore be possible for the details to be made up and interpolated by a scribe if we did not know better. They therefore qualify as a sub-coincidence rather than as a full undesigned coincidence. What is being demonstrated is that the harmony of the accounts is deeper than one might otherwise suppose.

Source: JCT

6.2 The Virgin Birth in John’s Gospel

The virgin birth is found in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, where the birth narratives insist that Jesus had no human father but was born Son of God. There is no equivalent narrative in either of the other two Gospels and some have suggested that the idea is therefore a later accretion to the Gospel accounts. However, John’s Gospel contains a short passage where the Jewish authorities appear to be aware that there is some irregularity in the descent of Jesus.

... They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” (John 8:41)

It is difficult to see why they should include this reference unless there were rumours of an irregular birth of Jesus. There is a similar point in one of Paul’s epistles:-

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law. (Galatians 4:4)

Again, given the male-dominated society of the time it is difficult to see why Paul would include the statement that Jesus was born of a woman unless this is a reference to the idea that Jesus was born of a woman but not a man.

Comment: The idea of the Virgin birth is sufficiently major for it not to be an insignificant detail in the general narrative. However, there are insignificant mentions of it in unexpected places which help to show that it was a part of the original Gospel and not merely a later interpolation.

Source: JCT

6.3 The Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and John’s Gospel.

The location of Jesus’ birth is given as Bethlehem in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. This, again, is hardly a minor element of the accounts. There are no birth narratives in either Mark or John and hence no main account giving the birth of Jesus as being in Bethlehem. There is, however, a reference to the town of Jesus’ birth in John.

Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was? (John 7:42)

This reference implies that the readers of John’s Gospel know something unknown to the people of Judea, this being that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Comment: Again, this is a minor point in the narrative of John but is well known in the Christian community at large. It is thus not really an undesigned coincidence but is an inconsequential reference in John to a well known fact not otherwise found in John's Gospel.

Source: JCT

6.4 John and the Ascension

The Gospel of John contains no direct account of the ascension of Jesus to heaven. This is described in passing in two of the synoptic Gospels and in detail in Luke and Acts. However, while John does not describe the ascension directly he does make several references to it. These are made in passing; the reference to the ascension of Jesus to heaven is never the main part of the narrative in which it is mentioned.

The passages where John mentions the ascension are:-

No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. (John 3:13)

Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? (John 6:62)

Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" (John 20:17)

The existence of these passages in the Gospel of John show that John was, indeed, aware of the teaching of the ascension of Jesus.

Comment: This coincidence is hidden away in John, although it is explicit in Luke and also in Matthew and Mark to a lesser degree. It is unlikely that John deliberately included minor hints of the ascension in his text; the indications of the resurrection in John are simply hidden details. However, the idea of the ascension is so well embedded in the other accounts and so explicit in the teaching of the Gospel at this time that it would be impossible for John to be unaware of it. This is a clear sub-coincidence. It simply shows that the teaching of the ascension was so well known at the time of the writing of John's Gospel that John could include it without a major reference.

Source: Blunt p308

6.5 John, the Bread and the Cup

The account of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke contains a description of the sharing of a loaf of bread and a cup of wine between the disciples. This is also included in the account of the Last Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The bread and the cup are so important that they have formed the central element of the Christian celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus ever since. However, this element is not present in the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John.

It is difficult to imagine that John was unaware of the breaking of bread. He must have been present at large numbers of services at which this took place, if nothing else. In fact the bread and the cup are alluded to in John 6:-

⁵³ So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

54 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

56 Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.

(John 6:53-56)

This passage can only refer to the breaking of bread.

Comment: The bread and the wine are only alluded to in John's Gospel but they were so well known in the Christian community that it is difficult to believe that it would be unknown. Again, the existence of the allusion in John shows that the bread and the cup were so well known that John could allude to them without a need to include a full description.

Source: JCT

6.6 The Trials of Jesus and Paul

Jesus and Paul were both arrested in Jerusalem and went through a similar judicial process. The shared details in the process are generally minor elements of the accounts but there is considerable correspondence between them. For instance, both Jesus and Paul undergo a kind of pre-trial semi-judicial process involving the court which appears to have the purpose of producing a suitable charge on which to try the accused. (Jesus in the house of the high priest [Mk 14:53,55], Paul in the Sanhedrin on a more formal basis [Acts 22:30 and the first ten verses of Acts 23])

One element of this process which is particularly clear is the way that both Pilate and Felix seek to pass the problem on to another jurisdiction. When Jesus is brought before Pilate one of the issues raised is the origin of Jesus. This is not raised immediately, but after a while it transpires that Jesus is from Galilee (Luke 23:6). As Galilee was at this time outside the Roman Empire proper, being a client kingdom and not part of the Province of Syria, Pilate had the option of passing Jesus on to the ruler of Galilee, who was Herod Antipas. Jesus is therefore sent to Herod, and it is only when Herod sends Jesus back that he is condemned to death by Pilate's court.

A similar occurrence occurs in Acts 23 when Paul is brought before Felix, Governor of Judea in succession to Pilate. Felix's first question is from which province Paul comes (Acts 23:34). It transpires that Paul is from Cilicia; this is no help to Felix, as at this point Cilicia was part of the same province as Judea (both were sub-regions of the province of Syria, which was sometimes referred to as "Syria and Cilicia"). Felix does not therefore have the option of sending Paul and has the awkward problem of maintaining Roman justice and keeping the Jerusalem authorities happy.

Comment: To a modern reader these details tell a hidden and somewhat unexpected story and the whole looks like an undesigned coincidence. The details are trivial and the points of Roman Law are both obscure and consistent. However, ancient readers would be far more familiar with Roman provincial law, and these details would be a matter of course to them. It would thus be much simpler for someone who lived in the Roman Empire in the first or second century AD to include details like this, even without thinking about the matter. All that the coincidence proves is that the person who wrote Acts and Luke was familiar with the judicial process in use in the first century AD. This is therefore a sub-coincidence rather than a full undesigned coincidence.

Source: JCT