

The Reliability of the Gospels - 5

Undesigned Coincidences

In earlier articles we have looked at evidence to help us to see whether the Gospels were a reliable record of the events they describe. We have seen that the detail of people, places and customs described in the Gospels matches the findings of archaeology. We saw that the language used in the Gospels was exactly what we would expect when looking at the time and location where the events took place.

In this article we compare different accounts and look at 'undesigned coincidences' as a guide to the accuracy of the Bible.

Suppose that you were writing an account of some event that you had seen. You would include the main story of what happened, but you might also include minor details of some of the things that you saw which were only incidental to the main events. If the account was accurate then these details would all fit together consistently. On the other hand, if you were inventing the account, or had a poor memory, or were reporting what someone else had told you in a general way, these details would be either absent or inconsistent.

The point here is that an undesigned coincidence would be almost impossible to invent. It would take a great deal of effort on the part of any writer, and as no-one looked for them until the nineteenth century, a first century writer would hardly be likely to put in the effort required. The presence of undesigned coincidences is therefore a guarantee that the text is an accurate record of the events it describes.

Features of an Undesigned Coincidence

For a set of details to count as an undesigned coincidence the following conditions must be present:

- ❖ The account or accounts must contain several details that can be compared.
- ❖ The details must be independent of one another.
- ❖ The details must be trivial, so that they are not a major part of the original account.
- ❖ The details must fit together to make a back story.
- ❖ This back story must be independent of the main narrative; usually it will also be trivial.

There are many coincidences which fulfil these conditions, they are found throughout the Bible. In this article we are only going to look at a few examples taken from just one episode in the Gospels.

Feeding the Five Thousand

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is a particularly fruitful place to look for undesigned coincidences as it appears in all four Gospels, which means that there are plenty of comparisons to be made. This was an occasion when Jesus fed five thousand men and an unknown number of women and children by multiplying the only food available – someone's packed lunch.

Grass

Three of the four accounts mention in passing that at the feeding of the five thousand there was a considerable amount of grass on the ground.

He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass (Matthew 14:19).

He commanded them to... sit... on the green grass (Mark 6:39).

Now there was much grass in the place (John 6:10).

The grass is a tiny detail which would easily pass unnoticed, and would mean nothing in most of the world. But in the Eastern Mediterranean there is a problem with grass. In the summer the weather is very hot and dry and the grass withers and goes brown. In the winter it doesn't grow. It is only in the spring, about Passover time, that grass grows without irrigation. And in John's Gospel we read:

Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near (John 6:4).

The feeding of the five thousand took place during the short period when grass would flourish, and three of the writers note the grass being there. At the feeding of the four thousand, a similar miracle which took place at a different time of year, the ground is mentioned but no grass (Matthew 15:35; Mark 8:6).

Barley

The Passover took place as the barley harvest began. A fairly poor family, which had not been able to store much grain over the winter, would be forced

to eat bread made from barley around the time of Passover. At the feeding of the five thousand, the bread available was made from barley, not the more usual wheat. The record tells us this detail:

There is a lad here who has five barley loaves (John 6:9).

Philip and Bethsaida

As a final point, when Jesus first decides to feed the multitude, he asks Philip "Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" (John 6:5). There is a reason that Jesus chose Philip – he came from Bethsaida: "Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter" (John 1:44). In Luke's Gospel we find that the feeding of the five thousand took place not far from Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). John does not mention where the miracle took place, and Luke does not mention where Philip came from. Again, the details of the account match, but not in an obvious way.

Conclusion

The presence of irrelevant details in a narrative suggests a good memory. But where the details are insignificant and match other, independent, insignificant details, we have extremely good evidence that the accounts are not only detailed but also accurate. This is what makes an undesigned coincidence.

For a list of 50 undesigned coincidences in the Gospels alone, visit www.biblethink.org.uk

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