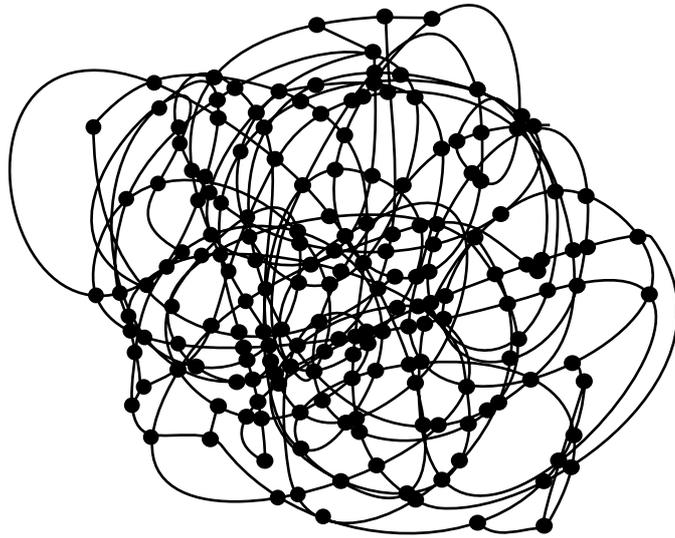


Undesigned Coincidences a Witness to the Reliability of The Bible



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Summary

An Undesigned Coincidence occurs where an account of some event contains an insignificant detail which is meaningless in itself but which fits in with other insignificant details to provide a coherent picture which is essentially independent of the main narrative.

The existence of undesigned coincidences in a written account is good evidence that the account is not fiction, but is an account of something that really happened. It would be difficult for a writer to invent an undesigned coincidence and the effort would be wasted if no-one discovered it. The existence of an undesigned coincidence also proves that the accounts involved have been recorded accurately and that the copying process after the account was written has preserved the text accurately. If there were errors in memory when the account was written down or there were significant copying errors then the insignificant details in the account would be lost and the coincidences destroyed.

The Bible contains very many undesigned coincidences. The author of this article has counted over 50 such undesigned coincidences in the Gospels alone, and there are doubtless many more that have not been found. Together these provide excellent evidence that the Bible contains an accurate record of the events it describes. These include the giving of some of the most important teachings for the wellbeing of mankind.

This article presents the general principles of undesigned coincidences in the Bible and gives some examples. These provide excellent evidence for the accuracy of the Bible accounts.

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1 Introduction

The Bible presents itself as the record of the transactions between God and mankind. It contains the words of prophets and accounts of the context in which those words were given. One of the important matters to investigate about the Bible is whether its words are accurate records of the words spoken by the people in it and of the context and history it contains.

There are two alternatives to the picture that the Bible is an accurate record of the words and actions of prophets and of the actions of God on earth. One is that the people who wrote the Bible wrote the accounts long after the event and were somewhat inaccurate in their reporting, thus losing much of the message of the prophets who spoke God's word and providing only a poor picture of what really happened in history. The other alternative is that the writers of the Bible actually made the stories up, or incorporated large portions of fictional material into a narrative with only the barest contact with any reality.

To decide whether the Bible is a revelation from God, which would make it an important message for mankind, it is important to see whether the words in it are accurate. The idea of undesigned coincidences is a method of approaching this problem.

Suppose that one were to listen to a court case, or one were to work through historical documents to gain a picture of what went on in some earlier incident. One of the things that one might do would be to compare the various witnesses to the particular incident in question and see whether they are consistent.

The important issue here would not be the main points of the testimony. Even if there is considerable inaccuracy in memory one would expect the major points of the witness to be retained. Similarly, if separate accounts are being written as fictions by different witnesses one might expect them to agree the main points of the material they present. What would be very difficult for separate writers to produce would be a correspondence in tiny details.

It is the correspondence of tiny details that is the substance of undesigned coincidences. An undesigned coincidence is an instance in the Bible where the various narratives which describe some event contain insignificant details which, although they are meaningless in themselves, fit together consistently with other insignificant details to provide a consistent picture. Frequently the undesigned coincidence will provide additional depth to the narrative and will uncover elements of the situation that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

2 An Example: Jericho and the Flax Harvest

This example comes from the Book of Joshua in the Old Testament. The background to this story concerns the occasion on which the Israelites, having left Egypt and crossed the desert, were camped on the east side of the river Jordan, ready to enter the Promised Land of Canaan.

They crossed into the Promised Land just before the Passover. This can be seen from two verses in the book of Joshua:-

- 19 Now the people came up from the Jordan on the tenth *day* of the first month and camped at Gilgal on the eastern edge of Jericho. (Joshua 4:19)
- 10 While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal, they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. (Joshua 5:10)

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Shortly before the Children of Israel crossed the Jordan they sent out two scouts to spy out the land they were to enter. They went to Jericho where they came to the house of a woman by the name of Rahab. The fact that there were spies in the area was discovered and a search party went after them, but Rahab hid the spies under a pile of flax on the roof. This is also described in Joshua:

6 But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. (Joshua 2:6)

This is significant because of the date of the flax harvest. In that area flax is harvested in the month before the Passover. This can be established by a study of the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 9:31) or by such records as the Gezer Calendar, an inscription from the time of Judges which contains an agricultural calendar of the time.

The point here is that there is no description of the time of the year at which the scouts hid under the flax. The time of year has to be deduced from the fact of a pile of flax on the roof, something that would only happen immediately after the harvest. The date of the crossing is more clearly stated, but there is no reminder of this in the account of the spies.

One can try to account for this in either of two ways:-

either The writer of the book of Joshua was extremely clever and determined to make the narrative stand up to the most rigorous scrutiny.

or The writer of the book of Joshua did not think about the time of year at all but merely included the details because they represented the way he (or his source) remembered actual events.

It is highly unlikely that the writer of Joshua was able to produce such a detailed correspondence. This sort of thing doesn't occur in modern fiction, even in cases where the writer is trying especially hard to produce a convincing narrative. Where the writer does manage to produce a coincidence of this kind he will usually ensure that the reader's attention is drawn to it.

It is just possible, although highly unlikely, that the writer of Joshua managed to produce this coincidence. The next coincidence could not possibly have been produced by even the most inventive writer.

3. Example: The Wealth of Hezekiah

Hezekiah was the King of Judah at the time of an Assyrian invasion. This was repulsed when the Assyrian army suffered a plague which almost completely destroyed it. The incident in his life which is of particular interest is one in which Hezekiah showed off his treasures to a delegation from Babylon-

- 1 At that time Merodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.
- 2 And Hezekiah was pleased, and showed them all his treasure house, the silver and the gold and the spices and the precious oil and his whole armoury and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah did not show them. (Isaiah 39:1-2)

The important detail here is that Hezekiah was clearly the possessor of great wealth of which he was proud.

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The date of the event can be fixed from a set of three references:-

- 1 At that time Merodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. (Isaiah 39:1)

This establishes that Hezekiah showed the delegation from Babylon his treasures shortly after he had been ill and recovered (an incident described in the previous chapter of Isaiah).

- 5 “Go and say to Hezekiah, ‘Thus says the LORD , the God of your father David, ‘I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. (Isaiah 38:5)

God at this time added fifteen years to the life of Hezekiah instead of requiring his immediate death. The incident must therefore have happened fifteen years before Hezekiah died, which would be fifteen years from the end of his reign.

- 1 Now it came about in the third year of Hoshea, the son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah became king.
- 2 He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem; and his mother’s name was Abi the daughter of Zechariah. (2 Kings 18:1–2)

Hezekiah reigned for 29 years. His recovery from illness therefore happened in the 14th year of his reign, and the visit from the Babylonians happened in the 14th or 15th year. This was about the time that the Assyrians invaded Judah and were repulsed, as one can see from the following verse:-

- 1 Now it came about in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and seized them. (Isaiah 36:1)

This dating is confirmed by Isaiah 38:6 where the announcement of Hezekiah’s cure is followed by a promise to deliver Jerusalem from the Assyrians.

Having established the date on which Hezekiah showed the Babylonians his treasures, one can go on to explain the problem. As the Assyrians approached Judah, Hezekiah attempted to buy them off. The account of this appears in Kings:-

- 14 Then Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, “ I have done wrong. Withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.” So the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold.
- 15 And Hezekiah gave him all the silver which was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasuries of the king’s house.
- 16 At that time Hezekiah cut off the gold from the doors of the temple of the LORD, and from the doorposts which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria. (2 Kings 18:14–16)

The tribute that Hezekiah paid to the Assyrians was severe. Hezekiah gave his entire personal wealth and the wealth in the national treasury to the King of Assyria. He was even reduced to stripping the gold leaf from the Temple doors. Having given all his wealth to the Assyrians, how is it that Hezekiah was able to show off substantial wealth to the Babylonians?

The answer here comes in 2 Chronicles.

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- 22 So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all others, and guided them on every side.
- 23 And many were bringing gifts to the LORD at Jerusalem and choice presents to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations thereafter. (2 Chronicles 32:22–23)

Because the Assyrian army had come to grief in operations against Judah, the thankful nations around gave gifts to Hezekiah; possibly they were acting entirely out of gratitude, possibly they were hoping that Hezekiah would extend protection to them, or possibly they decided that Hezekiah was a powerful ruler and that it would be well to be on his good side.

Whatever their thoughts, the wealth of Hezekiah was restored. The royal treasury was refilled and the gold in the temple was replaced. This is what Hezekiah showed to the Babylonians.

This coincidence is extremely complicated. It requires a comparison of five passages to show that the problem exists, and a further reference is required to explain what happened. These references are distributed in three different books of the Old Testament.

Had the story been invented by imaginative human beings then it is exceedingly unlikely that they would have been able to generate a detail of such complexity, particularly as the writers of Kings were already dead by the time that Chronicles was written. The detail would, of course, have been lost had the writers of Kings, Chronicles and Isaiah been less clear in their writing; almost any hint of vagueness would have eliminated the details on which the coincidence is based. Similarly, even a small amount of poor copying would have degraded the text to the point where the coincidence would not have appeared.

4. Numbers of Coincidences

There are very many coincidences of the kind outlined above in the Bible. In the 19th century J. J. Blunt wrote a book called “Undesigned Scriptural Coincidences” which gave a summary of 111 different coincidences in the Bible with another 22 coincidences between the Gospels and the writings of Josephus. In addition William Paley’s “Horae Paulinae” contains another 82 coincidences between Acts and the Epistles of Paul. Many other examples of coincidences exist and are waiting to be discovered; the author has found some and there will be many more. The coincidences found by Blunt and Paley are merely scratching the surface.

5. Properties of an Undesigned Coincidence

For a correspondence between two passages to qualify as an undesigned coincidence the following conditions must be satisfied:-

- **Independence**

The details in the various accounts must be independent of one another. It is not sufficient for both passages to be copying a detail from a prior written source; nor will a direct citation of one passage from another be sufficient to qualify as an undesigned coincidence. The indicators of

Summary of the Coincidence

Hezekiah was invaded by the Assyrians in the 14th year of his reign (Isaiah 38:5; 2 Kings 18:1-2; Isaiah 36:1)

As the Assyrians approached Judah Hezekiah attempted to buy them off. In doing this he completely impoverished himself. (2 Kings 18:14-16)

The wealth of Judah (and of Hezekiah) was restored by surrounding kingdoms who gave gifts when they heard that the Assyrians had gone from Judah. (2 Chronicles 32:22-23)

Shortly after this time Hezekiah shows off his considerable wealth to a delegation of Babylonians (Isaiah 39:1,2)

independence will be that the parallel passages being examined contain virtually no phrasing in common. The details may be in two different books which show some independence or they may be in the same book; in either case one would expect independence of the wording in which the detail appears or a complexity of the surrounding details which leaves the coincidence buried away and relatively inaccessible.

- **Insignificance**

It might be relatively easy for two independent sources to agree on the main elements of a particular narrative, especially if the narrative is traditional or derived from a long and widespread oral tradition. However, the insignificant details of such narratives are quickly lost and it is very difficult to arrange for them to correspond with one another, especially if the circumstances surrounding the coincidence are reported differently.

- **Opacity**

If the detail is hidden in the narrative so that one needs to dig somewhat in order to recognise it then this is evidence of a genuine coincidence. It would be difficult for an author to produce such a coincidence and then hide it away.

- **Unannounced by the Writer**

If writers were to be clever enough to think up an undesigned coincidence and were able to insert such a thing in the text, it would be of no benefit to them if the coincidence was not discovered for generations or was never discovered. There would therefore be a great temptation for the writer to draw attention to the coincidence. The fact that this never happens with the Bible, and that the writers of the scriptural narratives appear to be unaware of the coincidences is good evidence that the coincidences are genuine.

- **Consistency**

This is the obvious property of an undesigned coincidence. The insignificant details that make up the coincidence must be entirely consistent with one another, despite their opacity and the fact that they are clearly from independent sources.

The way that independence is seen can occur in several different ways. This leads to several different categories of undesigned coincidence. These are explained below; each category is illustrated by an example.

6. Independent Narratives from Different books.

This category involves independent narratives from more than one book. Because the books are written by different people it would be difficult to arrange for insignificant details within the narrative to match together. However, to show that the accounts by the different writers really are independent it is important that they are not simply copies from another, hidden, document. Differences in wording and approach should demonstrate independence.

The example about Hezekiah's wealth above falls into this category; it would have been difficult for the separate writers to have produced the detail and it is clear that the accounts are independent of one another.

Categories of Undesigned Coincidence

- 1) Fully independent narratives from different books.
- 2) Details from the same book which are hidden in the narrative so that they are far from obvious.
- 3) Coincidences involving external factors, for example weather or geography.
- 4) Coincidences with external support, for example from archaeology.
- 5) Coincidences between the Bible and external sources.

7. Independent Details within the same Book

Sometimes the detail lies within a single book. In such circumstances it is necessary for the connection between the details to be sufficiently obscure to render the details independent of one another. Often the connection between the details will involve some information from outside the narrative. The incident of the flax at Jericho is an example of this; the additional information is that the flax harvest is shortly before Passover. Another coincidence of this kind is found in the detail of the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

Green Grass and the Feeding of the 5000

One episode in the Gospels which is particularly packed with undesigned coincidences is the Feeding of the Five Thousand. The detail concerned with this particular coincidence is the description of the ground on which the five thousand sat during the incident. The Gospel accounts consistently mention that there was grass (Mark says “green grass”) on the ground. This is in complete contrast to the account of the Feeding of the Four Thousand where the narratives refer to the ground, and never to grass.

References to Grass

(in the feeding of the 5000)

- 19 And ordering the multitudes to sit on the grass... (Matthew 14:19)
- 39 And He commanded them all to sit in groups on the green grass. (Mark 6:39)
- 10 Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place... (John 6:10)

In Britain green grass goes without comment; it is seen all the time, but in the Middle East things are different. There the summer is too hot and dry for grass, which goes brown and shrivels up unless it is irrigated. In the autumn and winter it doesn't grow and it only reappears in the spring, a little before Passover time. This, it turns out, is exactly the time of the miracle. The narrative of John's Gospel begins: “Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.” (John 6:4).

The Feeding of the 4,000

- 35 And He directed the multitude to sit down on the ground; (Matthew 15:35)
- 6 And He directed the multitude to sit down on the ground... (Mark 8:6)

8. External Factors - The Wind in Paul's Voyage to Rome

The next category of undesigned coincidence is coincidences which involve some external factor. One example from this category is the direction of the wind during the early stages of Paul's voyage to Rome. Paul set sail in Caesarea; his escort had the intention of picking up another prisoner and then taking a route to Rome as rapidly as possible. However, this proved impossible and in the end, after having changed ship, they were shipwrecked on the island of Malta.

The first leg of Paul's journey was from Caesarea to Sidon. This was managed in one day, a fast passage for the time but one which could be managed fairly easily by a Roman ship if the wind was in the right direction. This would not have been wind from behind, but from slightly to the rear of a full side-wind. The ship would be travelling to the north north east, which would mean that the wind either came from the west (or slightly to the north of west) or from the south east. The westerly wind is by far the more likely of the two, given conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The next stage of the voyage was rather more difficult. The ship was forced to sail in the lee of Cyprus and then along the coast of Turkey.

The start of the Voyage

- 2 And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica.
- 3 And the next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care. (Acts 27:2-3)



The reason for the slowness of sailing and the path taken was the contrary wind. Roman ships did not sail well into the wind and a strong westerly wind would mean that the ship could only make significant progress to the East by exploiting slants of wind caused by proximity to the coast. Thus it took Paul a considerable time to arrive at Myra, a reasonably busy port on the south coast of Asia Minor.

In Myra they found a ship from Alexandria which was sailing to Italy. This ship was well off course. The route from Alexandria to Italy is almost at right angles to the route from Alexandria to Myra. This leaves one wondering why the ship was so far off course. The answer is the wind.

The same wind that slowed down Paul's passage would prevent a ship from Alexandria from sailing directly towards Italy. The ship would not risk trying to find a favourable wind along the African coastline as this was very shallow and had shifting sandbanks close to the shore of Cyrenaica; this was the famous "Syrtis Major" and was a considerable navigational hazard. To avoid this the ship had sailed to the north, hoping to find a better wind to carry it to the west. In this there had been some disappointment, but there was at least some hope of progress along the Turkish coastline. Again, it is the westerly wind, which is hardly mentioned, that affects both the progress of Paul's ship and the ship from Alexandria.

From Sidon to Myra

- 4 And from there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary.
- 5 And when we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia.
- 6 And there the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it.

(Acts 27:4-6)

From Myra to Crete

- 7 And when we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us to go farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone;
- 8 and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a certain place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

(Acts 27:7-8)

Paul transfers to the Alexandrian ship and they then continue towards Italy. The wind is still from the west or slightly to the north of west and progress is still difficult. The ship can continue slowly along the shore of Asia Minor, but when Cnidus is reached there is no more shore and the ship cannot continue to the west, the direction needed to pass round

Greece. At this point the only real choice is for the ship to turn to the south, where it reaches Crete. The ship then passes along the south coast of Crete (which suggests that the wind was slightly to the north of west). The course along the coast of Crete continued to just short of cape Matala, where the coast turns sharply north and there is difficult sailing in a westerly wind. Here the ship is forced to tie up at “Fair Havens”. It is only when the wind changes (v13) that the ship is able to continue.

This coincidence only involves one book, but it also involves an external phenomenon, the westerly wind, which Luke doesn’t mention. The wind is only mentioned once; in spite of this one can continually deduce its presence. The coincidence is effectively between the Acts of the Apostles and the realities of sailing an ancient vessel.

9. Undesigned Coincidence supported by Archaeology - Upper Rooms

The fourth of the categories is the most secure. This is the category in which there is a full undesigned coincidence within the Bible, and it is supported by external evidence as well. In the instance which follows the external evidence is archaeology, which has brought to light a minor feature of the architecture of Jerusalem; this feature appears as a minor detail in the Gospels.

This coincidence concerns the trial of Jesus. The scene is set by Mark 14:53-56 (see box). Jesus is in a large room. One can tell that it is large because it contains such a large number of people (the chief priests, the elders and some scribes, some of the Sanhedrin and many witnesses - there would also be some guards). Peter is in the courtyard, and has some view of Jesus - possibly because Jesus is near a window or a balcony.

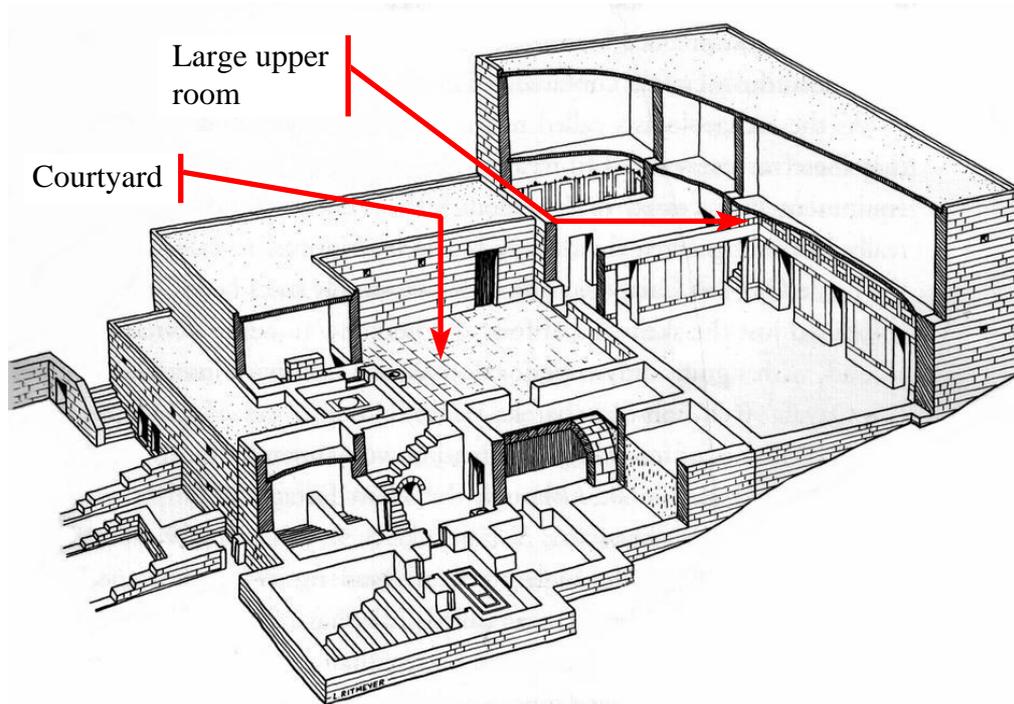
Verse 66 tells us that Peter was *below* in the courtyard. This means that Jesus must have been in an upstairs room and that we can therefore characterise the room in which Jesus appeared before the high priest as a large upstairs room.

Jesus with the High Priest

- 53 And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered together.
- 54 And Peter had followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the officers, and warming himself at the fire.
- 55 Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death; and they were not finding any.
- 56 For many were giving false testimony against Him, and yet their testimony was not consistent.
(Mark 14:53–56)
- 66 And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest *came,
(Mark 14:66)

This phrase should remind one of the room in which the last supper took place. This is also described for us in Mark’s Gospel record as “a large upper room, furnished and ready”. (Mark 14:15) This room was also large, it was also upstairs, and it was available for the use of guests.

The house of the last supper was not the same house as the house of the high priest, but both houses shared a fairly unusual architectural feature, the large upstairs reception room. In fact, this seems to have been a feature of well-to-do houses in Jerusalem. Josephus describes the palace built in Jerusalem by Herod the Great as having many guest rooms, each capable of holding very many people. In addition, archaeologists have found various well appointed houses from the time of Jerusalem and these fit the Gospel description. One house in particular is in the Wohl Archaeological Museum; this is known as the “Herodian Mansion” and it possessed a large upstairs room. The stairs to this room have been found and the pattern of supporting walls shows that there was no partition in the relevant part of the upper floor.



This picture shows an archaeologist's reconstruction of the "Herodian Mansion" house in the Wohl Museum in Jerusalem. At least one nearby house was owned by a priestly family; this is typical of an upper class house in first century Jerusalem.

The existence of an undesigned coincidence about the architecture of Jerusalem in the first century which is backed up by archaeology shows that the Gospel records are accurate in quite small details.

10. Coincidences between the Bible and External Sources: Paul visits Antioch

The final category of coincidence is one where the Bible does not agree with itself so much as with some external source. The obvious external sources are other ancient writers and archaeology. Blunt lists 22 coincidences between the Bible and Josephus; these help to establish both the accuracy of the Gospel records and the accuracy of the history of Josephus.

One coincidence of this kind which does not appear in Blunt concerns the reason that Paul the Apostle visited Antioch in Pisidia after he had travelled through Cyprus on his first missionary journey. The last town visited by Paul and Barnabas in Cyprus was Paphos where the governor, a man by the name of Sergius Paulus accepted the Gospel.

Paul in Cyprus

- 6 And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus,
- 7 who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.
- 12 Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

(Acts 13:6-7,12)

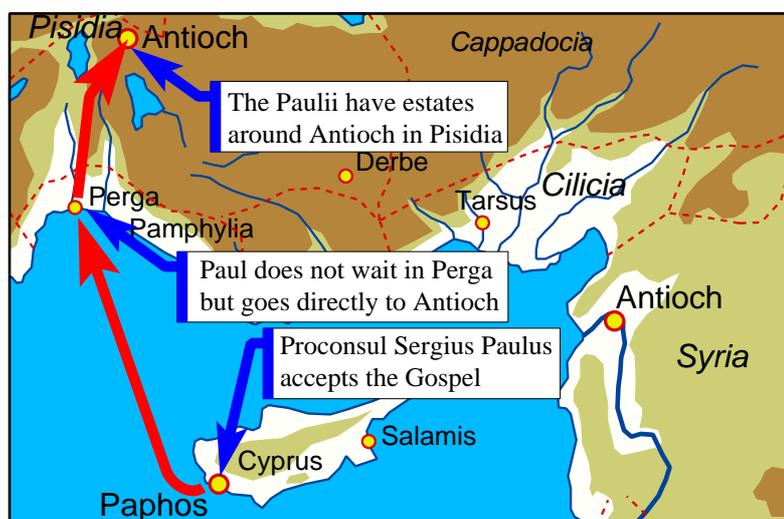
The next part of the journey was by sea, from Paphos to Perga in Pamphylia where John Mark left for Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas, however, went overland from Perga to Antioch in Pisidia. He can't have spent very long proclaiming the Gospel in Perga as this would not have left enough time for the rest of his journey that year. Instead he heads directly to Antioch, ignoring several other towns which were more conveniently situated. The question is why he should do this.

Antioch has been partially excavated by archaeologists who have found it to have been a considerable city. It was in lush countryside and surrounded by estates owned by various important Roman families.

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Among the inscriptions found in the area is an inscription by one L. Sergius Paulus, probably the son of the Governor of Cyprus in the time of Paul. Further investigation showed that the Paulii were the largest landowners in the area, having extensive estates and, as a consequence, considerable local influence.

This gives a likely reason that Paul should choose to go to Antioch. Once he had arrived there he could be confident of receiving a hearing and possibly he would have some protection from the local élites, at least to start off with. It is well within the bounds of possibility that he carried letters of introduction from Sergius Paulus in Cyprus.



This coincidence is interesting because it couldn't have been discovered until Antioch was excavated. The evidence remained untouched in the ground until the 20th century when it was finally excavated.

11. Discussion

The existence of Undesigned Coincidences in the Bible is established beyond doubt. The question is what they can mean.

Scriptural Undesigned Coincidences have the following properties:-

- They are insignificant details which might go unnoticed even by the writers of the accounts.
- They fit other insignificant details in a way which would not be expected to be possible if the accounts are invented, especially if the invention is carried out by several different and independent writers.
- The details are often supported by archaeological detail. They indicate a detailed and exact memory of the people and places of the time of Jesus.
- The details are in close agreement with geographical and topographical details of the areas concerned. The accounts were put together by people who were familiar with the places involved at the time of Jesus.

The obvious conclusion that one can draw from the existence of Undesigned Coincidences is that there is an underlying reality and that the Undesigned Coincidences are present because the various writers have an accurate memory of events which actually happened. This accounts for all the features of the Undesigned Coincidences in the simplest possible manner.

In addition, the coincidences are insignificant. This means that even when they are in a document, generations of inaccurate copying would be likely to lose them. Some Undesigned Coincidences are sufficiently poor to have been wiped out by the translation in some versions; only an accurate record of the narrative, which includes accurate copying, would preserve them.

The Critical Arguments

Some critics have become aware of undesigned coincidences as a witness to the accuracy of the Bible records. They have then attempted to produce other explanations for the existence of undesigned coincidences which don't include the idea that the Bible contains an accurate record of the events it describes. To fail to produce such an explanation would be to admit that the Bible is an accurate record and thus that the miracles occurred and that the prophets spoke the words that are recorded.

The answer that the critics have come up with (and it is difficult to imagine any other answer) is to propose the existence of another document which underlies the Bible accounts that we now have. All the accounts would be taken from this one document, which would explain how they harmonise in every detail, but different writers would select different elements of it, hence producing different accounts. The only arguments I have seen have been about the Gospels, and there is here the assumption of an underlying super-Gospel which is no longer in existence.

The most common idea here is that the underlying super-Gospel is in fact the Gospel of Mark. This, however, does not hold water, as the undesigned coincidences in the Gospels often involve details in other Gospels which are not present in Mark. This, of course, means that Matthew, Luke and John could not have copied these details from Mark.

The other possible alternative is that there is a super-Gospel which contains far more detail than the four Gospels in the New Testament, and of which these Gospels are samples. There are also insuperable problems with this idea:-

- this super-Gospel is entirely unknown and unsuspected until the present time. One would have expected that a document with such a detailed picture of the life of Jesus Christ would have been noticed and that accounts of it would have made their way into the early church, at the very least. One would also expect it to have been preserved.
- The Gospels of the New Testament record details in ways which indicate independence. If the New Testament Gospels were simply selections from a super-Gospel then there would be no independence between them. The fact that the details often appear to be contradictory at first sight shows that they are not simply copied from another narrative.
- The Gospel records are also in detailed agreement with archaeology and with non-scriptural authors like Josephus (who wrote after the Gospels were completed but did not use them). This can only have occurred because both the Gospels and the external sources are witnesses to something else. As one of the witnesses is archaeology, which does not involve any document, the origin of the Gospels must be reality itself; the things reported in them really did happen as described.
- The New Testament Gospels also contain details which connect them with what is known of the people who wrote them. John was written by a fisherman who knew both Galilee and Jerusalem, Matthew was written by someone who was most at home in Galilee and refers to himself in a way which differs from other people in his account, Mark was a young man who stayed in Jerusalem and Luke was an outsider who had information from many other people. This could not have arisen from a single detailed account.

On these grounds one can only reject the critical alternative as not matching the known facts.

12. Conclusion

The existence of undesigned coincidences in the Bible is a very strong witness to the accuracy of the Bible as a record of what was said and done. Even tiny details are recorded and they are clearly consistent with one another. They are also independent of one another.

Because the coincidences are so trivial they are usually overlooked completely. They are often omitted from translations of the Bible and almost never appear in commentaries. As a result one would expect them to be the first elements of a story to be lost if the writer suffered from a lapse of memory, or if the account was fictional, or if it was the result of oral transmission for even a quite short period. The existence of undesigned coincidences is thus good evidence that the Bible narratives were either written down soon after the events they describe or were written by people with exceptionally good memories (or both).

The existence of undesigned coincidences not only shows that the Bible narratives were originally written down accurately, but also shows that the text has been transmitted reliably to the present day. We can not only be assured that the original manuscripts of the Scriptures were reliable, but also that the modern text is trustworthy.

No other explanation accounts in full for the existence of undesigned scriptural coincidences.

Further Reading

For further reading on Undesigned Coincidences in the Bible see the following web resources:-

A website which will continue to update and provide further information on this and other issues on the reliability and inspiration of the Bible:-

<http://www.sale-christadelphians.net/>

J. J. Blunt's original book on undesigned scriptural coincidences available online:-

<http://biblecourses.com.au/blunt/index.html>

Paley's *Horae Paulinae*: a book which contains much in the way of comparison between the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of the Apostle Paul:-

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=I08PAAAAYAAJ&oe=UTF-8&redir_esc=y