

SEEDBED

2005, Second Trimester

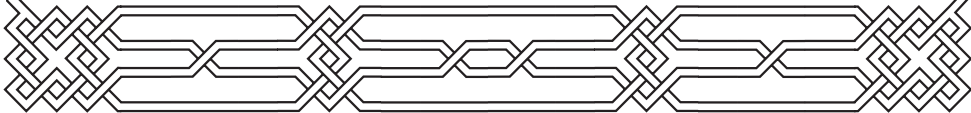
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EDITORIAL

The world is in turmoil these days as terrorism and suicide bombers bring death and destruction. News commentators interview politicians and police authorities in their search for explanations. As Christian workers in the Arab world, we look more closely at questions of theology and seek to understand the thinking and practices of the Muslim peoples we know. At the same time, we press forward in our efforts to share the Gospel with them. We hear amazing stories of God's work to reveal Christ in a variety of situations throughout the Arab world. We do not lose heart, but continue to make Him known and to disciple those Arab Muslims who are coming to faith in Christ.

This issue of *Seedbed* has a variety of articles to stimulate our thinking of how we evangelise and how we disciple. We are reminded also of the importance of prayer behind all our efforts. I look forward to your reactions and suggestions that are stirred up by our colleagues' articles. Have you any experience with the

question of coincidence that IL has raised from his teaching of students? Or can you add to Um Ithnain's guidelines for personal evangelism? What has been your involvement with transformational development as described by SM? What practical suggestions can you make for its implementation? How have you applied its principles to church planting issues? What advice do you have for discipling MBBs and encouraging their formation of a community?

Bear with us as we continue to work through the electronic publication of *Seedbed* — both for AWM colleagues and for other subscribers. If you have not yet contacted us to let us know if you would like the electronic version, please do so soon. We are trying to bring our records up to date as well as to develop a system of archives for past issues. If you would like any of the materials mentioned by our authors in this *Seedbed*, please get in touch with me.

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That's a Good Answer: Coincidence or God's Guidance?

by I.L.

Many Muslims believe that when a dream comes true, it is of God.

In folk Islamic practices, there are soothsayers who claim to know the future.

Christians often see the hand of God in their circumstances. Recently, a preacher described an incident from the tsunami disaster. There was a village where Christians were so unwelcome that celebrating Christmas was offensive. So to avoid provoking their neighbours, this group of Christians arranged a few days of Christmas celebrations on a nearby mountain. Apparently the village was wiped out by the tidal wave, but all the Christians survived.

A Muslim student explained that the 9/11 disaster in America was predicted in the Qur'an. He also claimed that the Qur'an was validated by the miracle of the words *man* and *woman* appearing an equal number of times.

All these examples have the common element of belief in the supernatural overruling of events. They also contain a strong element of Coincidence or Chance. A correct understanding of how Chance works in this world is important for Christian witness.

Let me begin by replying to the confident assurance that a recent modern event was predicted in the Qur'an.

Answer 1: *Produce the evidence.*

The first thing I did for the 9/11 question was to type the key words *9/11 Qur'an* into a search engine.¹ It turned out that this prediction was a hoax, and I found Muslim sources that said so.² I also checked at the website www.answering-Islam.org. Evidently, someone had deliberately fabricated a story, using the wildest of proofs containing many inaccuracies that any Muslim should have been able to spot. This story was then circulated on the Web. Many Muslim sources that are against Muslims naively repeating falsehoods exposed this hoax.

So the first reply can be to challenge Muslims to produce the evidence, because many of these wild rumours have no basis in fact.

Answer 2: *So what!*

Coincidence is normal. Look at the example of the words *man* and *woman* appearing an equal number of times. Why should it be seen as remarkable for two of the words of the Qur'an to have the same frequency? If you do a word frequency table of any text, then some words, even related words, may well have the same frequency. Why choose these two words in particular, which just happened to have the same frequency, as proofs of divine authorship?

Perhaps this can be explained in an easier way. Paulos³ gives the example

of the initial letters of the months of the year, *JFMAMJJASOND*. There are several words in these twelve letters. This is not remarkable at all. It would only be remarkable if we predicted in advance that one specific word (e.g. *month*) would be in the letters *JFMAMJJASOND*. I can see the words *ma*, *am*, *as*, *son* and the name *Jason*. An even more interesting example is to take the initial letters of the planets, *MVEMJSUNP*. The word *sun* is in this sequence of letters. This is entirely coincidental.

Answer 3: *What does the Bible say?*

- ‘Would you like to read a whole chapter with me from the Old Testament which concerns Jesus?’ Thus I would invite the person to read with me the prophecy about Jesus from Isaiah 53, pointing out the many predictions found there.

Scripture Gift Mission used to have a booklet with the main passages of prediction and fulfilment printed out neatly. It is probably out of print, but you could do something similar. *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* has a useful chapter.⁴ *All that the Prophets Have Spoken*⁵ also deals sensitively with the prophecies concerning Jesus.

The object, as always, is to introduce people to the Scriptures. Few Muslims seem to have heard about Isaiah, and reading with them some of the great chapters on who God is could be the start they need.

Of course, many Muslims will glibly play the ‘me, too’ game, and want to argue that Muhammad was

also foretold in the Bible, and that there are many predictions about him that also came true. That is another topic. Here in this article I want to focus on coincidence.

- Another comment might be: ‘Maybe God is speaking. Death is so final. Are you ready to meet God?’
- When talking about horoscopes: ‘Would you like to see what the Bible says about the purpose of the stars?’

This leads naturally into a study of Genesis 1 where the stars are created as lights for the night. The impressive display of stars is also a reminder of God’s infinite greatness. This means that the stars point to God.

Answer 4: *Why would God send that dream?*

Take the example of the dream in which a death is predicted, and the dream is attributed to God. I leave aside the question as to whether or not demons can influence dreams. Instead I ask, ‘Why would God want to tell someone that?’

It is clearly not so that the person who eventually dies can be warned. Usually someone else, who may know the person but not be in daily contact with him, has the dream. We could say, ‘Maybe God sent or allowed the dream so you can think seriously about death. We all die, and then comes the judgement. Are you ready to face God?’

So what is the biblical stance on Coincidence?

Firstly, we stand in awe of a sovereign God, who always achieves His purposes. He sustains this present world and is dynamically involved in it to make even the wrath of man serve Him. To God, everything is predictable and He actively controls everything. The lot is in God's hand. Nothing happens randomly to God. What appears random to humans is not random to God. Randomness is a concept that betrays the weakness of man: to us something can appear to be random, when from God's viewpoint of total knowledge, there is no such thing.

However, to avoid deism, or the mechanistic, clockwork universe, the Christian goes further. God did not just set the universe in motion and leave it to run down like a wound-up clock. God is an active participant in His creation. It is true that God did make the world to operate largely in terms of cause and effect, but God is also a free agent and human beings have a limited amount of freedom. Francis Schaeffer points out that the world is an open system with both God and man actively involved in it.⁶

In addition, God guides and protects His people and often works to deliver them. But the Bible also teaches that sometimes God does **not** deliver. Many heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 suffered agony and death. One of the many modern examples is the case of the famous

ten Boom sisters. Betsy died in the concentration camp while Corrie lived to a ripe old age.

So yes, in the tsunami there were remarkable deliverances. But some Christians also suffered enormously. Non-Christians can also tell tales of rescue while Christians can speak of disasters. I am not writing glibly: a very close Christian friend of my wife died in a suicide plane disaster. The point is that other non-Christians could mention how they suddenly were not able to catch that flight in which all perished, whereas Christians died in the disaster. So where are we?

Some years ago, I read that the Christians in Algeria had suffered very little in the civil war. But when I counted the deaths I knew of as a percentage of the Christian population, this was similar to the death rate for the whole country. Coincidental deliverance of a few is not necessarily evidence for the general protection of God on His people. Non-Christians also marvel at coincidental deliverance. So what is special about Christians?

Coincidence in the world

My point here is the confirmed view of mathematics; it is highly unlikely to change due to new theories or new discoveries.⁷

1. Coincidence is normal.

Since human beings are engaged in so many activities and lines of thought, sooner or later, two or more significant events will happen together. It is often difficult to distinguish between coinci-

dence and some real association. A large part of the work of science involves the struggle to maintain this distinction and to untangle what is coincidence and what is real cause and effect.

When two or more significant events happen close together, there might be a valid reason, but the most likely explanation is one of a simple coincidence. Unfortunately, most people do not understand this and feel it must be the wrong conclusion. This feeling is discussed in point 3 below.

2. Runs of coincidence are normal.

Paulos (1988:44) provides a computer printout of a random sequence of *O* and *P*, each with a probability of 0.5, which is the equivalent of tossing a perfect coin, in this case over 300 times. What is obvious from such a printout is that runs of three or more *P*'s, or three or more *O*'s, are very common. They are caused just by the nature of randomness in the created world. Therefore, we should be extremely hesitant to read any other explanation into a run of coincidences.

3. Humans are hard-wired / created to notice coincidence.

People notice what is unusual. Sometimes the noticing happens at the subconscious level. Driving would not be possible without the subconscious ability to observe changes in the peripheral vision – that wider area which we are not focusing on. There is a growing body of evidence that people are able to perceive and sense

things at the subconscious level. Subconscious perception could account for a significant part of coincidental thinking and dreaming.⁸

4. Vague dreams, ideas or thoughts are likely to come true.

The more vague the dream, idea or thought is, the greater the number of possibilities for it to come true. We know this from horoscopes, which tend to be so general that they apply to anyone.

5. Dreaming of a significant disaster is a relatively common event.

Sooner or later, for someone, such a dream will come true.

6. Humans have a tendency to remember right predictions and to forget the false ones.

Therefore, people give undue importance to coincidence.

The Christian and coincidence

1. Not everyone who has a sign will turn to Christ.

In the time of Christ, people who saw and experienced miracles did not necessarily follow Jesus. Only one of the ten healed lepers returned to Jesus. Many saw miracles and were hardened, even attributing the power to Satan. Although we are grateful for those who have turned to Christ after a miracle, we need not give undue importance to these signs.

*2. We should be very slow and cautious
when interpreting Coincidence.*

Christians often look to a chain of circumstances as indications that God is guiding. I fully believe that God, who is actively involved in relating to each believer, does control all circumstances. Trust in the loving sovereignty of God is part of the core of our faith. I know that coincidence is normal, and that God is in control. I also know well the human tendency to twist matters, to jump to conclusions or to resist submitting to God. This means that I am reluctant to use circumstances alone as an indication of God's guidance. In the books on guidance I have read, this question of coincidence has been largely ignored. While coincidence is ultimately from God, coincidence may, or may not be, a form of guidance of God. We cannot decide how to interpret events based on the events alone. Our reaction to circumstances should be growth in humility as we actively seek God and submit our thinking to Him who knows and overrules all.

At times I have thought that God was guiding through a seemingly miraculous sequence of unusual events. Later I found out that I was wrong. I need to learn to be very suspicious of my own interpretation of circumstances.

3. Attitude to false predictions

We need to remember that God commanded His people never to listen to anybody making a single wrong prediction. A true prophet sent from God would never make a mistake (Deut. 13:18). In the Old Testament, the commands encouraged people to think carefully before making a prophecy and speaking in God's name. One false prediction was enough for sanctions to be imposed.

We know that one of the reasons some false prophets seem to succeed is that they make many predictions and highlight the occasional one that was right. Before they make a correct prediction, they probably make many false predictions. Since those making wrong predictions would have been killed, right predictions, but not coming from God, would have been rare. Execution of false prophets sent out a strong message against listening to them. In our day, we should know enough about the role of coincidence to make us distrust those who claim to tell the future. We also have strong warnings in Scripture not to listen to false prophets, even if what they say should come true.

Let us therefore not give too much importance to Coincidence, but learn how to turn the conversation to more profitable and truthful directions.

Footnotes

- 1 I used the programme *Copernic*, available free from www.copernic.com, with the advantage of using several search engines simultaneously. It presents a list of possible sites which is saved in a list of searches. I can then delete the irrelevant, go online and get the pages, with or without images. These pages are automatically saved and can be viewed offline within Internet Explorer.
- 2 See for instance http://rationalthinking.humanists.net/fastest_growing_religion.htm, *The story of 'accelerated conversion' and some afterthoughts* by Syed Kamran Mirza, who also attacks other hoaxes such as supposed conversions of famous people to Islam. Also look at *Twisting the Qur'an to Justify the WTC tragedy (what does the Qur'an say about 9/11?)* in <http://freepublic.com/focus/f-news/981270/posts>.
- 3 Paulos JA. *Innumeracy: mathematical illiteracy and its consequences*. UK: Penguin, 1988. See also other books that explain mathematical fun, such as *Why do buses always come in threes? The hidden mathematics of everyday life*, by R Eastaway and J Wyndham, Robson books, UK, 1998.
- 4 McDowell J. *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. English and Arabic.
- 5 *All that the Prophets Have Spoken*. See www.goodseed.com.
- 6 Schaeffer FA. *How should we then live?* Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1980. See chapters 7 & 8.
- 7 I am well aware of the debate concerning the use of psychology within the church. Whereas a lot of psychology used in counselling is pseudoscience – it has been rejected or has yet to be verified and it has multiple theories and opinions – these statements of mathematics are undisputed and well-tested statements of reality.
- 8 Phillips J 2004. "Mindsight" could explain sixth sense.' *New Scientist*, 4 February, 2004.