

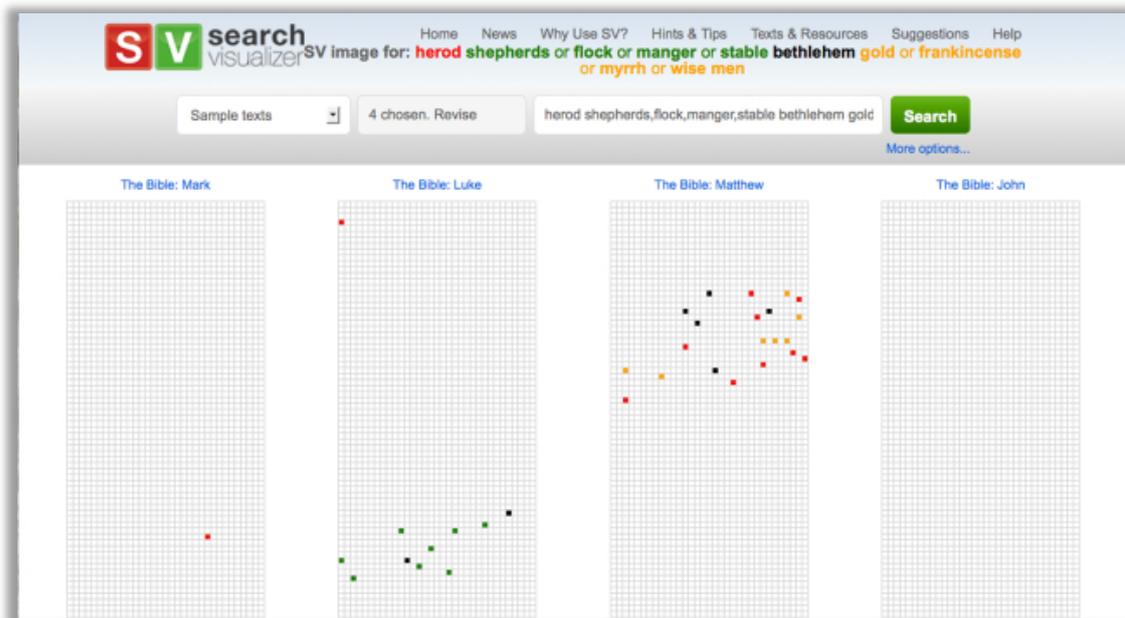
What the gospels actually say about the Christmas story

By Gordon Rugg

Background: This article looks at the classic elements of the Christmas story – shepherds, Herod, wise men, etc – across the four New Testament gospels. This visualisation shows how these elements are divided among the gospels, rather than shared.

This article was originally posted on December 17, 2012.

Most popular accounts of the nativity include the shepherds coming to worship Jesus in the stable, and the wise men following a star to Bethlehem bearing gifts, and Herod's massacre of the innocents, all in a single story. When you look at the original gospels, though, you see something different.



The image above shows the opening sections of the four New Testament gospels.

The red squares show where mentions of Herod occur. He features prominently in the opening section of Matthew, but is mentioned only once each in the opening sections of Mark and Luke, and isn't mentioned at all in the opening section of John. When you look in detail at those two single mentions, they're both about something happening during the reign of Herod, not about the nativity story. The mention in Mark is actually about the Herodians rather than Herod himself, and the mention in Luke is about what happened to Zacharias in the days of Herod.

The yellow squares show mentions of the wise men and their gifts. This theme only appears in Matthew.

The green squares show mentions of the shepherds and their story. This theme only occurs in Luke.

Finally, the black squares show mentions of Bethlehem, which occur only in Matthew and Luke.

So what's going on here?

For theologians, this is old news: the differences in the gospel accounts are well known. To believers, there is no inherent contradiction; Matthew is telling one part of the nativity story, and Luke is telling

the other. To non-believers, this is another example of different stories being included because some unknown editor wasn't sure which version – if any – was true, and wanted to err on the side of including the right one, even if that meant having to reconcile two different accounts. There are similar debates about the two stories of how David met Saul, and the two accounts of the genealogy of Jesus.

For anyone wanting to study texts, this example shows how Search Visualiser lets you compare texts swiftly and easily, and lets you see patterns that are hard to spot when you're working with only the text.

If you'd like to try using Search Visualiser yourself, you can find it here:

www.searchvisualiser.com

The sample texts on the site include the first five books of the Old Testament, and the four New Testament gospels. There are also some Shakespeare plays, and some archive materials from the American Civil War.

Some hints and tips for searching the sample texts:

You can select the texts you want to visualise using the “Sample texts” option in the menu window on the left that starts with “Entire web”.

That brings up the “Choose texts” menu option. You click that, to bring up the “Sample texts” window.

When the “Sample texts” window comes up, you tick the boxes for the texts that you want to visualise, and then click “Close” to exit that window.

You can now enter your keywords. If you want to treat two or more words as synonyms – for instance, “infant” and “baby” – then you simply type them in together, separated by a comma without spaces – for instance, infant,baby

You'll probably find the “More options” button (below the green “Search” button) useful at this point. The extra options let you fine-tune the presentation of your results – you can vary the sizes of the squares, and the number of results you show per screen, and whether you search for whole words or parts of words, and whether you have each square represent a word or a letter. If you're working with a large text, then you'll probably want to show fewer records per screen; for very large records, you'll probably want to show only one record per screen, and to use the smallest square settings.

If you want to look in more detail at one of your results, then you can click on it. That brings up an interactive version, where you can mouse over any of the coloured squares to see the underlying text surrounding that keyword. To close the interactive version, you click the “Close” button in the top right of the image.