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Matthew 2:1–12—A Carol about the Bethlehem Star

An English poem probably composed in the nineteenth century became a popular Christmas carol that we know as “The First Noel.” Different versions exist, including a version in the *Cornish Songbook* (1929) and one in the *New English Hymnal* (1986). As seen in the first stanzas below, the different versions maintain the same concepts in each stanza but employ variant phrases. The only major difference is found in the Coventry version of the hymn, which returns to Luke’s Gospel for its final stanza, with a visit to the manger (not mentioned in Matthew).

Cornish Songbook (1929)	New English Hymnal (1986)
O well, O well, the Angels did say To shepherds there in the fields did lay; Late in the night a-folding their sheep, A winter’s night, both cold and bleak.	The first Noel the angel did say Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay; In fields where they lay, keeping their sheep, On a cold winter’s night that was so deep:
Refrain	Refrain
O well, O well, O well, O well, Born is the King of Israel.	Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, Born is the King of Israel.

The main focus of the poem is on tracing the history of the Bethlehem star, which is only mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel. The first stanza of the poem (in either version) reports an appearance of that star to shepherds, something that is not mentioned in the Bible.

Thus “The First Noel” may be read as an example of Gospel syncretism: The story of Jesus’s birth in Bethlehem is told in the Gospels of Matthew (1:18–2:18) and Luke (2:1–20). The magi (“wise men”) are featured in Matthew’s story (but not Luke’s); the shepherds are featured in Luke’s story (but not Matthew’s). “The First Noel” wants to include both shepherds and magi—and it finds an ingenious way to do so. The connecting link (missing from the Bible) is the star, which the poet assumes both shepherds and magi must have witnessed.