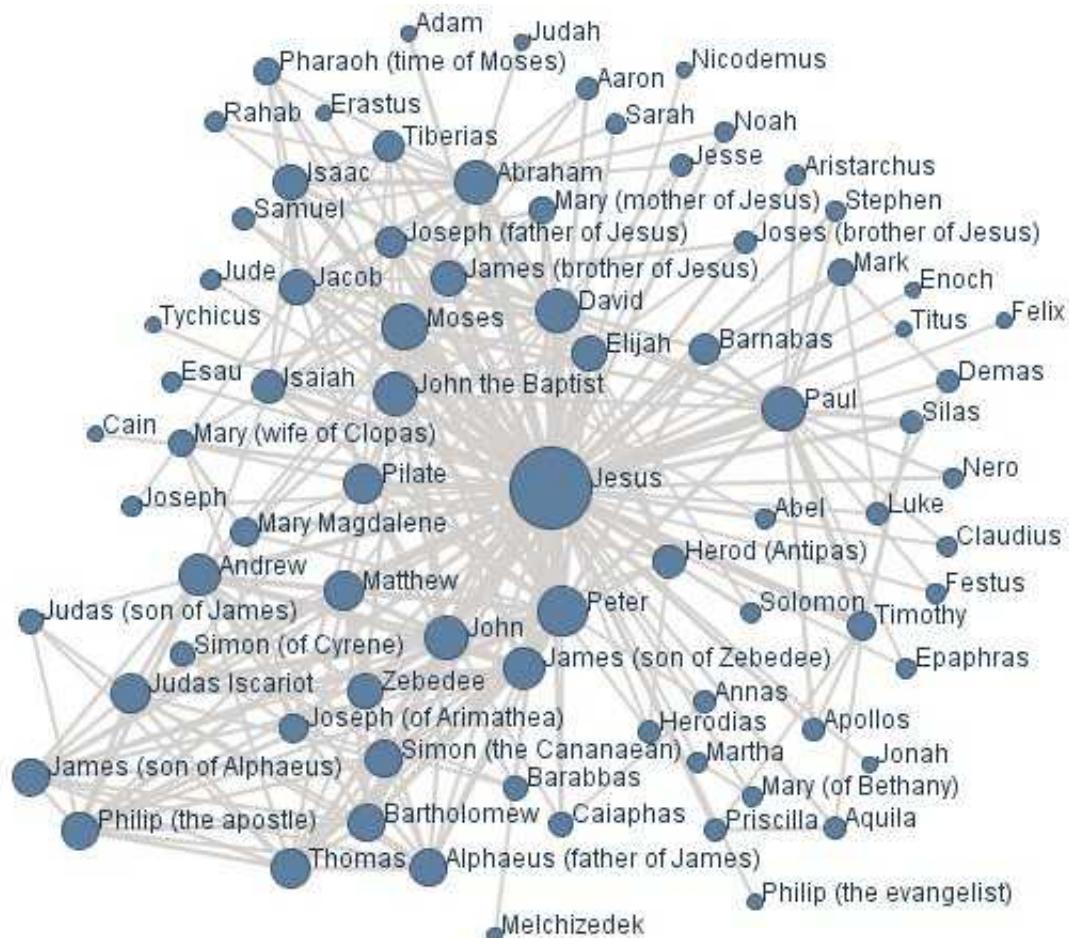


Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » It's About Russia

One of my favorite Woody Allen quips from his tragically short period as a stand-up comic is the punch line to his hyperbolic story about taking a speed-reading course and then digesting all of *War and Peace* in twenty minutes. The audience begins to giggle at the silliness of reading Tolstoy's massive tome in a brief sitting. Allen then kills them with his summary of the book: "It's about Russia." The joke came to mind recently as I read the self-congratulatory blog post^[1] by IBM's *Many Eyes*^[2] visualization project, applauding their first month on the web. (And I'm feeling a little embarrassed by my post on the one-year anniversary of this blog.) The Many Eyes researchers point to successes such as this groundbreaking visualization of the New Testament:



News flash: Jesus is a big deal in the New Testament. Even exploring the “network” of figures who are “mentioned together” (ostensibly the point of this visualization) doesn’t provide the kind of insight that even a first-year student in theology could provide over coffee. I have been slow to appreciate the power of textual visualization—in large part because I’ve seen far too many visualizations like this one, that merely use computational methods to reveal the obvious in fancy ways.

I’ve been doing some research on visualizations of texts recently for my next book (on digital scholarship), and trying to get over this aversion to visualizations. But when I see visualizations like this one, the lesson is clear: **Make sure your visualizations expose something new, hidden, non-obvious.**

Because *War and Peace* **isn’t** about Russia.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, March 6th, 2007 at 10:38 pm and is filed under [Research](#)^[3], [Scholarship](#)^[4], [Text Mining](#)^[5], [Tools](#)^[6], [Visualization](#)^[7]. You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#)^[8] feed. You can [leave a response](#)^[9], or [trackback](#)^[10] from your own site.

References

1. ^ [the self-congratulatory blog post](#) (www.readwriteweb.com)
2. ^ [Many Eyes](#) (services.alphaworks.ibm.com)
3. ^ [View all posts in Research](#) (www.dancohen.org)
4. ^ [View all posts in Scholarship](#) (www.dancohen.org)
5. ^ [View all posts in Text Mining](#) (www.dancohen.org)
6. ^ [View all posts in Tools](#) (www.dancohen.org)
7. ^ [View all posts in Visualization](#) (www.dancohen.org)
8. ^ [RSS 2.0](#) (www.dancohen.org)
9. ^ [leave a response](#) (www.dancohen.org)
10. ^ [trackback](#) (www.dancohen.org)

Excerpted from *Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » It's About Russia*

<http://www.dancohen.org/2007/03/06/its-about-russia/>

READABILITY — An Arc90 Laboratory Experiment

<http://lab.arc90.com/experiments/readability>