

SUNDAY BEFORE THE NATIVITY - OF THE GENEALOGY

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
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Matthew 1:1-25

On the Sunday before the Nativity of our Savior we always read the genealogy of the Lord from the Gospel of St. Matthew. In its language and content, St. Matthew's gospel primarily is directed towards the Hebrews. Therefore, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the Christ, the messiah, and he demonstrates this by emphasizing Jesus' connection with the Torah, the prophecies and the writings of the Old Testament. According to the prophecies, the messiah must descend from the House of David, for he will be the King of Israel, and not only Israel, but all mankind, and all the nations will be subject to him. Furthermore, it is from the seed of Abraham that all progeny of Israel will proceed, whose descendants, we are told in Scripture, "will be more numerous than the stars in the sky" (Gen. 22:17). Therefore, the very first words of the genealogy connects Jesus with David and Abraham. It says "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." It continues from Abraham: "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob" and so on down to Joseph. But it doesn't say "Joseph was the father of Jesus," because Jesus was not conceived by the human seed of man but was *begotten of the Father before all ages* as it says in the Creed. In other words, Jesus was generated by God the Father. When did this take place? The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit *always existed*. There was never a time when they never were. Therefore, in the genealogy when it gets to Joseph it says "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ."

According to St. Matthew there are three sets of fourteen generations in Jesus' genealogy. Why is the number fourteen so significant? The Hebrews practiced a type of numerology where each letter of the alphabet was assigned a number. If you add up the numbers which represent the letters which make up the name of David, they add up to *fourteen*. Again St. Matthew is emphasizing the connection of Jesus to David. A close examination of the genealogy will actually show that there were *thirteen* generations even though Matthew cites fourteen, and certainly there were more than three sets of fourteen generations. Be that as it may, it was merely a way for St. Matthew to try to emphasize Jesus' connection to David, even if some names are arbitrarily omitted and if the mathematics do not always neatly add up to fourteen. He is not being sneaky or trying to twist the truth to make a point. He knows that people are not stupid and he obviously knows that people know how to add. One way of looking at it is that you can say that he is using "literary license" or "poetic license." It is characteristic of ancient Semitic literature that historical or chronological accuracy was not as important as the *message* that was being conveyed. For the authors and compilers of Holy Scripture, the most important thing was to convey the will of God. That is why such studies as "the Bible as history" or "the Bible as literature" are really rather foolish, because they are missing the whole point.*

There is another genealogy in the New Testament and we find it in the Gospel of St. Luke. Matthew records 41 names in his genealogy, whereas Luke's genealogy is longer and he records 77 names. In addition, Luke wrote his gospel with a different mindset than Matthew. Luke emphasizes the universality of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He is the savior of all mankind. He is not only addressing one specific people or nation. In keeping with this, Luke goes all the way back to Adam and to God Himself.

The genealogy of the House of David is recorded in the Old Testament. However, it breaks off when Israel is conquered by the Babylonians and the members of the royal household are murdered. However, the Hebrews kept hidden a member of the House of David and the record of the genealogy continued but was kept secret due to persecution. Only in the New Testament with the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ is that which was once kept secret now

revealed so that all may know and worship Jesus as the Son of God, the Anointed One Who has come to save the world, the rightful heir Who has descended from the House of David.

The preparation for the Great Feast of the Nativity of our Lord is coming to a close. Next Friday is already the eve of the Great Feast. Friday morning we will have the Vespereal Liturgy of St. Basil and in the evening the Vigil with Great Compline and Matins. Saturday morning the Divine Liturgy of our Lord's Nativity will be served, and then after receiving the Holy Body and Blood of our Lord, we will all go to our homes with our families and friends and rejoice on what Fr. Tom Hopko called "the Pascha in the midst of winter." Maybe there will be snow and maybe not. Perhaps it will be very cold, or perhaps it will be a mild winter day. Nonetheless the days are shorter and the darkness of the night is longer. The leaves have fallen from the trees and the flowers have withered until spring. During this time which can sometimes seem gloomy and sad, the Lord comes to the earth, quietly, in the little Palestinian town of Bethlehem. The Angels and the shepherds in the field will sing hymns of praise as they adore the Christ child. Three wise men will journey from the East and offer gifts at the feet of the Divine babe, who will lay with His Mother in the hay and straw of a manger, surrounded by oxen and farm animals. Let us pray this week, fast and repent for our sins, for soon a great joy and time of celebration will be upon us.

May we all have a joyful, peaceful, beautiful celebration of the birth of Christ Who comes to save the world. A blessed and glorious festal season to everyone! Amen.

*The Old Testament as we know it today was developed and compiled over the course of many centuries. Furthermore, the various books of the Hebrew Bible did not appear as single entities, but are various writings from various centuries that were grouped together as time went on and were combined to make up the various books of the Bible. As various texts were combined into a book, sometimes they are not in chronological order, and sometimes there are contradictions from a narrative point of view. The Hebrew Bible is divided into three basic parts: the Torah (instruction, or Law) (the first five books of the Bible, commonly called the five books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). Hence the acronym TaNaKh, or Tanakh, the name of the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible.