

Byzantine Saints' Lives in Translation

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HOLY WOMEN OF BYZANTIUM

TEN SAINTS' LIVES IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Edited by Alice-Mary Talbot

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THE LIFE OF THE BLESSED ELISABETH THE WONDERWORKER

"Many daughters have wrought valiantly; many have obtained wealth,"¹⁷ said Solomon the most wise, prophetically proclaiming that, at various times, women as well as men would shine with the beauties of every type of virtue and share in the spiritual gifts of the divine spirit and marvelously work miraculous wonders and signs¹⁸ throughout the world. For scripture also shows countless and innumerable women, both under the <Mosatic> Law and after the advent of grace,¹⁹ transforming feminine frailty to manly resolution and, through self-discipline and painful ascetic practice, courageously overthrowing the ancient conqueror²⁰ of our foremother Eve and common enemy of the human race through the power of the Most High, and being crowned with the shining trophies of victory.

One of these women is Elisabeth, renowned and famed for her miracles. She came from the large city of Herakleia in Thrace. [p. 252] Her parents were not obscure or undistinguished, but well-born, wealthy, and full of virtue. Her mother's name was Euphemia, and her father—who at that time with *dishypatos*²¹—was named Eunomianos. They both lived up to their names in a pious and God-pleasing manner,²² and their faithful meditation on the Lord's law²³ made them noteworthy and well known to all.

They made their residence near the aforementioned city <of Herakleia> in a village we now call Abydenoi, though it was known in days of old as Thrakokrene. The couple—being *godly* and *blameless* like the *righteous* Job,²⁴

¹⁷ Prov. 31:29 (phrases reversed).

¹⁸ Cf. Acts 6:8, 2 Cor. 12:12.

¹⁹ I.e., in both the Old and New Testaments.

²⁰ I.e., Satan. Halkin has noted a parallel usage of *πρεσβυτερής* in Gregentios, *Disputation with a Jew Named Herban* (PG 86:664B).

²¹ A title of honor used in the Byzantine Empire from the 9th through 11th centuries. The *ODB* (1:638) notes that in the 11th century the title was often conferred on abbots, judges, etc.

²² Eunomianos means "good law <keeper>" and Euphemia "good reputation."

²³ Cf. Ps. 1:2, 118:70.

²⁴ Cf. Job 1:1.

and emulating the hospitality of the patriarch Abraham²⁵—gave liberally to all the needy the necessities of life. And so, also like Abraham,²⁶ they received, as a result of their vow,²⁷ fruit of the womb²⁸ worthy of their own beauty and good works.

This is how it came about. After sixteen years of marriage had passed, they still remained childless,²⁹ and, being bereft of offspring, they of course grieved. They were sorely distressed, and they earnestly beseeched God, who knows the hearts <of men>, to release them from the sorrow of childlessness and to give them a child as heir of their wealth and lineage. And the Lord, who *performs the desire of them that fear Him*, graciously *heard their supplication*,³⁰ and did not disregard the supplication intended to be well pleasing to Him.

[p. 253] Now, it had been the custom of old in that place for the inhabitants from all the areas round about to come together every year on the feast of the victorious martyr Glykeria³¹ and to celebrate for an entire week³² to-

²⁵ Cf. Gen. 18:1-8 (the hospitality of Abraham to the three men at the Oak of Mamre).

²⁶ Isaac was born to the childless Abraham and Sarah when they were 100 and 90 years old, respectively; cf. Gen. 17:15-19, 21:1-3.

²⁷ See below, pp. 125-26.

²⁸ Cf. e.g., Gen. 30:2, Lk. 1:42.

²⁹ The infertility of a saint's parents, a frequent commonplace in *vitae* (see, for example, the *Life* of St. Thomas, Chaps. 4-5), has its roots in the biblical motif of barren parents who at long last bear a holy child (e.g., Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist). At the same time, sterility was a real problem in the Byzantine world, as suggested, for example, by the use of amulets; see J. Herrin and A. Kazhdan, *ODB* 2:994, s.v. "Infertility: A recent Ph.D. dissertation at Catholic University (1994) by Eithalia Walsh, "Overcoming Gender: Virgins, Widows and Barren Women in the Writings of St. John Chrysostom," discusses the dilemma that infertility posed for theologians.

³⁰ Cf. Ps. 144 (145):19.

³¹ St. Glykeria was martyred at Herakleia in the 2d century under Antoninus Pius. Cf. H. Delehaye, "Saints de Thrace et de Mésie," *AnaBoll* 31 (1912), 249-52; *BHG* 699-699n; *BHG Nov. Act.*, p. 82.

³² This is a fairly early example of a saint's feast being celebrated for a full week. Presumably the actual feastday was the culmination of the week's festivities. For discussion of these festive celebrations, see S. Vryonis, "The Paragregis of the Byzantine World," in *The Byzantine Saint*, ed. S. Hackel [University of Birmingham, 14th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies] (London, 1981), 196-226.

gether with those who lived in the city—this was done on the thirteenth of May. So the blessed <Elisabeth's> admirable parents came with everyone else and participated in processions and all-night doxologies and visited the holy shrines throughout the city, shrines which contained the sacred relics of the forty holy women and Ammos the deacon³³ and of many others. (The *Life* of the great Bishop Parthenios discusses at more length both these relics and the expensive and brilliant construction of the renowned churches.)³⁴ And so, venerating these <saints>³⁵ and giving them due honor, they feasted and celebrated with the populace, carrying with them <in procession> throughout the city the ever-venerated [p. 254] head of the martyr,³⁶ who was beheaded for the sake of Christ. While the divine liturgy was being celebrated by Leo,³⁷ who was the bishop of the city at that time, in the church which is called Treasure and is dedicated to the Mother of God, <whenever> Eunomianos (the aforementioned father of the blessed <Elisabeth>) gazed at <the head of St. Glykeria>, he noticed her sometimes smiling slightly as though happy and some times with a sad and gloomy expression. He considered this to be a visible symbol of his trust in the martyr and he found his soul divided between happiness and sadness.

³³ These forty women together with the deacon Ammos (Ammon) were executed at Herakleia in the early 4th century under the emperor Licinius; their feastday is 1 September. See *BHG* 2280–81; Delehaye, "Saints de Thrace," 194–97, 247–49.

³⁴ Parthenios was a bishop of Lampsakos martyred in the early 4th century under Constantine I. As Halkin notes (p. 253 n. 4), neither the extant *vita* of Parthenios by his disciple Crispinus (*BHG* 1422, PG 114:1348–65) nor the later version by Symeon Metaphrastes (*BHG* 1423) discusses at any length the churches and shrines in Herakleia. The *vita* by Crispinus, in fact, mentions only two by name: the martyrion of St. Glykeria (col. 1360D) and one which is called κατὰ Χρῆστος (col. 1361A). However, it is quite possible that Elisabeth's hagiographer had access to a longer *vita* of St. Parthenios, which has not survived.

³⁵ An alternate interpretation would be that the veneration refers to the churches or shrines rather than to the saints themselves.

³⁶ Glykeria's head was normally kept at her church in a marble reliquary that bore an iambic inscription; the reliquary still exists in the church of St. George at Ereghli (formerly Herakleia). Cf. Delehaye, "Saints de Thrace," 250.

³⁷ There is no evidence of an archbishop Leo for the see of Herakleia in the 5th century; it should be noted, however, that the evidence is fragmentary since the extant lists of bishops have several gaps, particularly between 459 and 518; cf. Halkin, 254 n. 2. Leo I of Herakleia was bishop from 783 to 806, Leo II from 1263 to 1281 (A. Lebe in Tsamias, *Metehikon* 2:360 n. 15).

After the service ended, the throng made fervent prayer in the church of the Theotokos called Katakheidas³⁸ by the local inhabitants, and at about the sixth hour they all returned to the holy church of the martyr Glykeria. After the vespers hymn, the others left the church, but Eunomianos remained there alone with his wife Euphemia, fervently beseeching the victorious <martyr> to release them from the bonds of their barrenness and to grant them, beyond <all> hope, a child. They prayed long into the night, and finally lay down on the floor and went to sleep for a while.

And then—O unspeakable and terrible mysteries of God—the martyr most sweet (like her name)³⁹ stood before the man in a dream and said to him, [p. 255] "Why, <my good> man, do you bring your sufferings to me and seek from me that which only God can give you? However, if you will promise me in truth to acquire in yourself a *broken heart* and a *humbled spirit*⁴⁰ and never to exalt yourself over your neighbors, then the most generous Lord will speedily grant you through my <intercession> a girl child, and you shall call her name Elisabeth, for she will be shown forth like the mother of the Forerunner and Baptist John." After he eagerly swore an oath to do these things, the saint made the sign of the cross over him, and left him.

<Eunomianos>, immediately waking from sleep, related to his wife the vision he had seen; she replied that she had beheld a similar <vision>. And in like manner, the archbishop, who was most beloved of God⁴¹ and was honored with the gift of foresight, counseled both of them and advised the couple, agreeing with the martyr of Christ. After the feast, he entertained them for three days. Then, blessing them, he dismissed them to return home in peace.

So the wife immediately conceived, and, after nine months had passed, she gave birth to a baby girl just as the martyr had truly foretold. When forty days⁴² had gone by, Eunomianos took the child and her mother to the city.

³⁸ The sanctuary called κατὰ Χρῆστος in Crispinus' *vita* of St. Parthenios (PG 114:1361A).

³⁹ I.e., St. Glykeria (ἁγιοκურτήν = "most sweet").

⁴⁰ Cf. Ps. 50 (51):17.

⁴¹ θεοφάδοτατος, a standard epithet of archbishops; cf. I. and N. P. Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* (Brookline, Mass., 1984), 135.

⁴² In the eastern rite, a "churching" of mother and child occurs forty days after the child's birth (in commemoration of Christ's presentation in the Temple when he was forty days old), and the child may thereafter be baptized.

Upon arriving at the church of the famed martyr and approaching her pure icon (located on the right side), he threw himself face first on the floor, giving thanks to her [p. 256] with a joyous heart and tears. Then, as he gazed upon the icon and suitably addressed his thanksgivings to it, he saw a sight both strange and remarkable, for her face blazed brighter than the sun and her lips gently moved. "The time has come, Eunomianos," she said, "to fulfill your vows to God!" This instilled *year and trembling*⁴³ and great amazement in him. And so <he and his wife>, approaching the most blessed archbishop and giving him the customary greeting, beseeched him to give their child the seal in Christ.⁴⁴ Whereupon, receiving⁴⁵ the child, he baptized her and named her Elisabeth, as the martyr had foretold. After praying at length for <her parents>, he said to the child, "Through you, child, may the Lord be gracious to me, granting me remission of sins." Thereupon, they returned home rejoicing. The child *increased in stature and favor*.⁴⁶ By the age of three, her father was already teaching her the sacred letters.⁴⁷ She showed herself to be so expert and able in these that she was able to recite the Lives of the saints <by heart> after a single hearing.⁴⁸

When she had just turned twelve, her mother departed from earthly life.

⁴³ Cf. Ps. 54 (55):5, 1 Cor. 2:3.

⁴⁴ Baptism and, especially, chrismation.

⁴⁵ Literally, "having catechized" or "having given instruction." This may refer to the first part of the baptismal service, where the convert (or sponsor) repudiates Satan and all his works and gives a profession of faith.

⁴⁶ Cf. Lk. 2:52.

⁴⁷ Literally, "turned her over to the learning of sacred letters," which may imply that she was entrusted to a tutor although Lete also interprets the expression to mean that she was taught by her father. "Sacred letters" (ιερά γράμματα), a phrase derived from 2 Tim. 3:15, refers to the "primary cycle of elementary education which was begun at about the age of six or seven and consisted of reading, writing and spelling based mainly on religious texts" (C. Galatariotou, *The Making of a Saint. The Life, Times and Sanctification of Neophytos the Recluse* [Cambridge, 1991], 154-55). In the *Life of St. David*, Symeon, and George of Lesbos, "sacred letters" are defined as the *propaedeutic* (i.e., elementary education) and the Psalms (ed. I. van den Gheyn, *AnalBoll* 18 [1899], 214). Cf. also P. Lemerle, *Byzantine Humanism* (Canberra, 1986), 111; A. Molaitis, "Schooling in the Iconoclast Centuries," in *Iconoclasm*, ed. A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham, 1977), 88-90; and R. Browning, "Literacy in the Byzantine World," *BMGAS* 4 (1978), 48-49.

⁴⁸ Or "from simply listening to them."

Her father wanted to give her away in marriage,⁴⁹ but the girl could not bear to hear of it at all, for she desired rather to be wedded to the immortal bridegroom, Christ. And, three years after this, her father Eunomianos also journeyed rejoicing to the Lord, and the blessed [Elisabeth], left alone, turned straightway to God, the Father of orphans. Since she desired the life of solitude and poverty [i.e., monasticism], she distributed among the poor the gold and silver that her parents had set aside for her, as well as her other property (which was considerable), and so through the hands of the needy offered <her fortune> to God; and she gave both her male and female slaves their freedom. [p. 257] So, without looking back, she hastened to the Queen of Cities [Constantinople] and came to the sacred monastery of the holy great martyr George, called "the Little Hill,"⁵⁰ where her paternal aunt was the mother superior.⁵¹ When she arrived there, she bid the world adieu and clothed herself in the angelic garment⁵² and advanced with all her heart to the ascetic struggles. And soon she managed to attain every type of virtue, becoming filled to overflowing with all the spiritual gifts of the Spirit. She *mortified <her> body and brought it into subjection*⁵³ by long fasts: like the great Moses⁵⁴ and Elijah the Tishbite,⁵⁵ she would often endure the entire forty days <of Lent> without

⁴⁹ In Byzantium, girls could be betrothed at age seven and married at twelve. For references to the pertinent legislation, see *vita* of Theodora of Thessalonike, below, note 31.

⁵⁰ This convent of St. George does not correspond with any of the monasteries of St. George listed in Janin, *EglisesCP*, a work published before Halkin's edition of the *vita* of Elisabeth. Another *vita* of Elisabeth, by the monk Chariton (*BHG* 2122), locates the convent of the "Little Hill" (whose dedication to St. George it omits) near the eastern of St. Mokios and states that it was also called τὰ μικρά Ποιτότου; cf. Criscuolo, "Vita di Santa Elisabetta," 62. In the 10th century, however, the convent of τὰ μικρά Ποιτότου was dedicated to the Theotokos; cf. Janin, *EglisesCP*, 197. See also the *vita* of St. Thomas, Chaps. 16 and 22, for more on this convent.

⁵¹ It was common for a young man or woman to enter a monastery directed by a relative, frequently an aunt or uncle; see, for example the *vita* of Theodora of Thessalonike, below, Chaps. 9, 20. See also A. Laiou, "Observations on the Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women," *ByzF* 9 (1985), 75-76, and A.-M. Talbot, "The Byzantine Family and the Monastery," *DOP* 44 (1990), 121-23.

⁵² I.e., the monastic habit.

⁵³ Cf. 1 Cor. 9:27. The KJV translation reads "kept under" for "mortified."

⁵⁴ Deut. 9:9.

⁵⁵ 3 K[ing]s 19:8.

[p. 180]

THE LIFE AND CONDUCT OF OUR BLESSED MOTHER,
ATHANASIA, AND A PARTIAL NARRATION OF HER
MIRACLES¹⁴

1. Participating in the commemoration of the saints is an apostolic precept.¹⁵ It is also very laudable and an act of salvation to compile their Lives and set them forth as a common benefit for any who wish <to read them>.¹⁶ So then I will try to compile the Life of the blessed Athanasia, narrating in my discourse a few facts about her, so that these not be consigned to the depths of oblivion by time and thereby harm very many people. So then this praiseworthy woman, who bears the name of immortality,¹⁷ who lived her life admirably and showed herself to be a handmaiden of the Lord of all, was born of a father named Niketas, and a mother named Irene. They were of noble family¹⁸ and very God-fearing people who resided on the island of Aegina.¹⁹ Being born of and reared by these <parents>, she truly earned her designation as a *useful vessel*²⁰ of the all-holy Spirit. When she was seven years old, she learned the psalter in a short time and eagerly studied all the Holy Scriptures.

One day while sitting and weaving at the loom by herself, she saw a shining star descend as far as her chest. It shed abundant light on her and then

¹⁴ The title shows that the author has consciously added the posthumous miracles to the end of the *vita*. Accounts of the ceremonial transfer of a saint's relics and his/her posthumous miracles were sometimes preserved in separate works apart from the *vita* proper, as in the *vita* of Theodora of Thessalonike, which follows (*Life* no. 7, in this volume).

¹⁵ A punning variation on Rom. 12:13.

¹⁶ The Greek phrase τῶν ἁγίων ἐπιταφιστῶν καὶ στερητῶν ποιεῖς δυσκολίας of interpretation Carras ("Athanasia," 212) suggests an emendation to ἐπιταφιστῶν καὶ στερητῶν, "of very praiseworthy and salvific acts," but the predicate genitive does not work well with στερητῶν, and I suggest the reading was ἀπὸ τῶν ἁγίων (for τῶν ἁγίων) as the Latin translation of Surinus seems to construe.

¹⁷ Athanasia in Greek means "immortality."

¹⁸ *Epatritidi*, i.e., the local aristocracy or, less specifically, "well-born."

¹⁹ Aegina is an island in the Saronic Gulf southwest of Athens.

²⁰ 2 Tim. 2:21.

disappeared from her sight. By this <light>, therefore, she was abundantly enlightened in her soul and came into an absolute hatred for the vanity of life.

She intended to enter into the monastic way of life, but her parents very forcibly joined her to a husband, though she was unwilling and adamantly refused. After living with him for only sixteen days, she suddenly came into <the state of> widowhood. [p. 181] For, when the barbarian Maurousioi²¹ swept into those parts, her husband went out to join battle and (by the judgments that <only> God knows) became a casualty of war.

2. After considerable time had passed and Athanasia was struggling within herself and directing her mind toward the monastic life, suddenly an imperial edict was issued that unmarried women and widows should be given in marriage to foreign men.²² So because of this, her parents drove Athanasia into a second marriage, since she had not yet attained <her goal of> monastic life. But even after this had happened, she maintained her habitual concern for her own salvation, applying herself tirelessly to the chanting of the psalms and devoting herself with assiduity to reading <Scripture>, and accepting no change in her <previous> good <ways>, but adorned with meekness she shone in a blessed fashion with humility of heart. Wherefore this praiseworthy woman was much loved by all who knew her good ways. She so distinguished herself in almsgiving that her household goods did not suffice, even though they were very abundant, for the generous distribution <to the poor> from her hand. She graciously received monks visiting from all over, and she plentifully provided widows and orphans and all the needy with the necessities of life.

Once after a famine arose and everyone was reduced to destitution, she generously donated food not only to her fellow believers, but also compassion-

²¹ Specifically North African Moors or Berbers, but here by a Byzantine literary metonymy Spanish or African Muslims. The raid probably occurred within a few years of the conquest of Crete by the Arabs under Abu Hafṣ, ca. 823–828. The earliest possible dating for the raid on Aegina is 805–807; see Christides, *Conquest of Crete*, 158.

²² A. Kazhdan has suggested a connection with the edict of Theophilus that is mentioned in the *Acts of the Forty-two Martyrs of Amorion*, ed. V. Vasilevskij and P. Nikitin, *Skazaniia o 42 amonijskich mučenikach* (St. Petersburg, 1905), p. 27.5–7 [= *Reg I*, no. 422]. The ἐθνικὸς could be Christian non-Greeks, pagans or other foreigners. Since Athanasia's second husband eventually entered a monastery, he must have been a Christian from birth or as the result of conversion. The purpose of the edict may have been to encourage the assimilation of foreigners.

ately distributed <food> to the so-called Athinganoi,²³ who were then hard-pressed by the famine and approached her. For she fulfilled that saying of the Lord which states, "*Be ye merciful as your heavenly Father for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.*"²⁴ Not only did she provide them food, but also clothed them with garments and comforted them with other gifts. On the Lord's day and [p. 182] on feast days, she lovingly assembled all the neighbor women²⁵ <in her presence> and read them the Holy Scriptures, gradually opening their minds and in a godly way directing them into a fear and desire of the Lord.

3. In this way, advancing according to God and blooming with virtues, just like a flower-laden meadow, she persuaded her spouse, who yielded to her many exhortations after some years of cohabitation, to withdraw from the world and everything in it and to enter into the sacred way of life of the monks. After <becoming a monk> and distinguishing himself in a blessed manner, he fell asleep in the Lord.

So the blessed woman, taking advantage of her freedom,²⁶ totally dedicated her entire self to God. For finding other very pious women, who had the same aim and were ardent in spirit, and joining with them in full unanimity, she very soon withdrew from worldly confusion.²⁷ Distributing to the poor all that she possessed according to the commandment of the Lord,²⁸ along with the aforementioned honorable women she changed her worldly garb together with her way <of life>. And abiding quietly in one place at the invitation of a virtuous and blessed man who tonsured them, after three or four years

²³ Literally, "untouchables." They were heretics from Asia Minor who adopted a number of Jewish practices: see *ODB* 1:223 and J. Starr, "An Eastern Christian Sect The Athinganoi," *HTHR* 29 (1936), 93-106.

²⁴ Lk. 6:36 and Mt. 5:45.

²⁵ This may include the Athinganoi who at that time were close to her, since the text seems to imply that she was introducing them to the Christian scriptures.

²⁶ Athanasia, now liberated from the bonds of marriage, is manumitted again before her death by the vision of angels who hand her papers of manumission from the slavery of this world; see Chap. 12.

²⁷ A reference to Athanasia's taking monastic vows and her formal founding of a female monastic community.

²⁸ Mk. 10:21.

she unwillingly accepted the leadership of the assembled women,²⁹ called first by them but in her mind considering herself the last, and fulfilling that saying of the Lord which states, "*Let the one wishing to be first among you be the last of all and the servant of all.*"³⁰

4. So what account could explain, what tongue could present the loftiness of her great humility? For she would never allow <herself> to be served by anyone of them nor <allow> water to be poured over her hands <by anyone> during her entire lifetime, as all her fellow <nuns> assured everyone following her holy dormition [p. 183], after making inquiry of each other. Considering herself unworthy to be with them, let alone be served by them (even though she was mother superior) and engaging in great abstinence, she used to partake of a little bread and a modest amount of water after the ninth hour,³¹ refraining entirely from cheese and fish, but only on the feast of Easter tasting them with thanksgiving; and during the holy days of Lent, she used to eat every other day, subsisting on raw greens alone, not partaking of any drink whatsoever during all those sacred days. And for her rest, she partook of little sleep, not on her side, but leaning on a rock that was prepared for this purpose. Not only during the holy and great Lent did she practice this discipline but also during the other two <Lents>, I mean that of the Holy Apostles and that of Christmas.³² Her bedding set on the ground was of fairly large stones, covered above with a small goathair <cloth>,³³ and leaning on this at the time of rest *she watered in every night with tears*, in the words of the prophet.³⁴ For since the love of God abundantly inflamed her from within, she also used to shed abundant tears both in chanting the psalms and in prayers, so that one would be more likely to see a spring without streams of water than <to see> without tears her holy eyes, which continually looked to Christ.

5. Her inner garment was a goathair <shirt>, which irritated her flesh with its roughness, and her outer <clothing> was a ragged garment of sheep

²⁹ Athanasia accepts the office of mother superior.

³⁰ Cf. Mk. 9:35.

³¹ After 3 p.m.

³² The fasting period before the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on 29 June and the fasting period before Christmas.

³³ Or "goatskin"?

³⁴ The "prophet" is David with reference to Ps. 6:6.