

## Article

# Hagiography as Source: Gender and Conversion Narratives in *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*

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**Abstract:** Drawing on the work of Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent, this essay proposes utilizing hagiographies from the *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, a fifteenth-century Ethiopian collection of saints' lives, to explore various aspects of conversion. Other scholars employ a similar approach when analyzing hagiographical literature found in medieval Europe. While acknowledging that these texts do not provide details about the historical experience of conversion, they can assist scholars in understanding the conception of conversion in the imagination of the culture that created them. This essay specifically focuses on the role of women in conversion throughout the text and argues that, although men and women were almost equally represented as agents of conversion, a closer examination reveals that their participation remained gendered. Women more frequently converted someone with whom they had a prior relationship, especially a member of their familial network. Significantly, these observations mirror the patterns uncovered by contemporary scholars such as Dana Robert, who notes how women contributed to the spread of Christianity primarily through human relationships. By integrating these representations of conversion from late medieval Ethiopia, scholarship will gain a more robust picture of conversion in Africa more broadly and widen its understanding of world Christianity.

**Keywords:** Ethiopian Orthodox Church; religious conversion; women; representation; medieval Christianity; hagiography

## 1. Introduction

If the entry for “conversion” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* serves as any indication, it is difficult for scholars to agree on what exactly constitutes conversion (Rambo and Farhadian 2005). For several decades, A. D. Nock’s description of conversion as “the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right” dominated much of the conversation on the topic (Nock 1933). More recently, this definition has received substantial criticism, and scholars from diverse fields with different approaches have proposed new ways of understanding this religious experience (Jindra 2014).<sup>1</sup>

With the exponential growth of African Initiated Churches (AIC) and a religiously plural environment, Africa constitutes a significant location for the study of conversion (Horton 1971).<sup>2</sup> Most research on conversion in Africa focuses on the modern period, yet the continent is also home

<sup>1</sup> For a helpful overview of the myriad of approaches to and definitions of conversion, see the introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Horton developed an interpretation of why traditional religions in Africa moved towards (i.e., converted to) world religions. His theory remains controversial and demonstrates one approach to conversion in Africa.

to one of the earliest branches of Christianity that survives today, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Phillipson 2012).<sup>3</sup> Several scholars have considered the historic experience of conversion in Ethiopia in the pre-modern period, paying particular attention to the relationship between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the region (Kaplan 1984, 2004; Abir 1980). Religious adherence and conversion often depended on who controlled a particular region, which changed frequently in the medieval period as both Christianity and Islam expanded in Ethiopia. Both Christianity and Islam integrated local religious elements, making the historical reality of conversion less clear-cut than it sometimes appears (Fauvelle 2020). These studies shed light on the activities of male monastics and merchants as agents of conversion for their respective religions.

While the emphasis on the historical experience of conversion remains valuable, it often leaves out consideration of women's participation. This paper intends to take a different approach by examining the representation of conversion in a fifteenth-century compilation of saints' lives known as *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*. Although hagiography can be a difficult source to use for historical research, it can also be a fruitful one. While these accounts do not necessarily align with the historical experience of conversion in Ethiopia, they do help scholars understand the conception of ideal conversion in the imagination of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. By analyzing the conversion narratives contained within the text, this paper argues that *The Book of the Saints* portrayed both men and women as agents of conversion, yet their representation remained gendered (Sterk 2010a, 2010b).<sup>4</sup> Women more often converted someone with whom they had a prior, personal relationship, whereas men participated in conversion through their officially recognized roles within the ecclesiastical structure. This study hopes to contribute to the broader understanding of the ways in which women contributed to the movement of Christianity outside of traditional missionary sources.

## 2. Hagiography as Source

Hagiographical texts like *The Book of the Saints* present challenging obstacles as sources. As Jeanne-Nicole Mellon Saint-Laurent observes in her work on early Syriac saints' lives, hagiography does not fit neatly into the genre of history, fiction, or scripture, yet it contains characteristics and conventions from each (Saint-Laurent 2015). Hagiography weaves these three types of literature together in a complex, multi-layered text which can prove difficult to unravel. Additionally, no set criteria exist for evaluating and interpreting hagiographical literature. This lack of methodological coherence creates an additional hurdle when working with saints' lives. The issues highlighted by Saint-Laurent are not confined to Syriac sources; rather, hagiographical accounts prove problematic across geographic location and time frame.

Scholars who work with hagiographies diverge in their approaches to the texts, especially their value as historical sources. Looking at the late medieval European context, historian R. N. Swanson points out that "exactly what the appropriate response should be to medieval saints' lives is a matter of considerable debate" (Swanson 1995). For example, scholars disagree over how a hagiography's intended audience might have interpreted the story, particularly how they understood the more fantastic elements of saints' lives. Hagiographies of martyrs often employed detailed descriptions of gruesome tortures and incredible miracles before a saint's martyrdom. The *Legenda Aurea*, the most popular compilation of saints' lives in medieval Europe, included numerous such accounts of martyrdom (Duffy 2012).<sup>5</sup> Eamon Duffy notes that these sections, among others, caused later humanist

<sup>3</sup> According to the church historian Rufinus, a Syrian Christian named Frumentius converted the Askumite king, Ezana, in the mid-fourth century (Aksum was an ancient kingdom that predated the development of the modern nation of Ethiopia). Athanasius consecrated Frumentius as the first bishop of Ethiopia. While Rufinus' account is difficult to verify, numismatic and archaeological evidence support King Ezana's conversion to Christianity in the mid-fourth century.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Sterk recently took a similar approach in regard to gender and representation in her two-part article on female missionaries in the Christianization of the east in the post-Constantinian period.

<sup>5</sup> Compiled in the thirteenth century as a handbook for preachers by Jacobus de Voragine, a Dominican friar, the *Legenda Aurea* included entries for the Roman Catholic Church's major liturgical holidays and lives of the saints.

and Protestant scholars to attack the historical value of the hagiographies in the *Legenda Aurea*, an attitude that persisted for several centuries.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, the methodological concerns raised by Saint-Laurent, Swanson, and Duffy provide a brief overview of the complexity associated with using hagiographies as sources.

In light of these difficulties, it is reasonable to wonder how scholars can use saints' lives as sources at all, yet the authors considered above provide several possible answers. Duffy acknowledges the difficulty in separating historical events from miraculous occurrences, but still argues for the value of Voragine's text as a reflection of the "most pressing preoccupations of the Church of his own day" (Duffy 2012). Rather than looking for historical information about a particular saint, Duffy suggests using the *Legenda Aurea* as evidence for the culture that produced the text, in this case, the thirteenth-century Roman Catholic Church. Swanson agrees with Duffy, arguing that to judge or evaluate saints' lives in "purely historical terms" is misguided (Swanson 1995). Instead, he advocates for an approach to saints' lives that highlights their spiritual and devotional content. Medieval Christians in Europe privileged the moral lesson or spiritual truth exemplified by the saint over the text's historical accuracy, and scholars should utilize a similar lens when analyzing saints' lives.

Saint-Laurent makes similar conclusions and proposes additional ways to utilize hagiographies as sources. Her work builds on the assumption that "sacred narratives shed light on the beliefs and cultural ideas of the people who wrote them," and stresses the importance of looking for shared motifs, themes, and symbols recurring throughout the narratives (Saint-Laurent 2015). The common elements repeated in these stories can point scholars toward issues the author or compiler of the text found most important and wanted to emphasize. Finally, Duffy views the *Legenda Aurea* as "the distillation of both the imagination and the soul of the Christian Middle Ages" (Duffy 2012). While *The Book of the Saints* was not as ubiquitous for late medieval Ethiopian Christianity as the *Legenda Aurea* was for medieval Europe, Duffy's idea of Christian imagination proves useful. Hagiographical texts contained representations of the Christian imagination regarding different aspects of the faith. Saints' lives helped shape the boundaries of Christian expression and provided models for the hearers or readers to emulate. The representations of sanctity in hagiographies influenced the audience's understanding of what it meant to be holy and how one could achieve holiness. Employing the methods and considerations discussed here, this paper seeks to analyze the representations of conversion contained in *The Book of the Saints* through the lens of gender.

Although hagiography constitutes one of the most important sources for Ethiopia's medieval history, *The Book of the Saints* has received little scholarly attention. In his masterful study *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270–1527*, Tadesse Tamrat relies heavily on saints' lives for information about significant religious figures and events (Tamrat 1972). Steven Kaplan wrote a key article addressing the use of hagiography in studying medieval Ethiopia (Kaplan 1981; Rossini 1937).<sup>7</sup> He argued against earlier scholarship that evaluated the reliability of a saint's life based on how quickly after his or her life the text was written. Kaplan advocated a new approach but maintained that only saints' lives written about Ethiopians by Ethiopians should be considered Ethiopian hagiography. His recommendation colored much subsequent scholarship on Ethiopian saints' lives and placed *The Book of the Saints* outside consideration. In contrast, some of the most revered saints in Europe were not Europeans, nor were their lives written by Europeans.

While Tamrat and Kaplan's work mainly considered male saints' lives, Selamawit Mecca has written several articles on Ethiopian female saints (Mecca 2006, 2009). Following Kaplan's limitations, however, Mecca only examines the hagiographies of female saints from Ethiopia. While Kaplan and

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of the reception of the *Legenda Aurea* by humanist and protestant scholars, see (Reames 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Kaplan's article is in part an argument against the viewpoint of the prolific scholar of Ethiopia, Conti Rossini. Rossini developed a "date of composition" approach that assigned historical value to hagiography based on how quickly it was written after a saint's life. Kaplan rightfully finds this approach problematic, but his approach is also problematic. See (Kaplan 1981). For Rossini's "date of composition view", see (Rossini 1937).

Mecca's studies are helpful, this paper departs from their approach and suggests that saints' lives written about non-Ethiopian saints can still provide valuable information about medieval Ethiopia. Most of the saints' lives in *The Book of the Saints* are of non-Ethiopians, but the text's acceptance by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church allows for consideration of the way it represents conversion and gender.

### 3. Representations of Conversion

*The Book of the Saints* included narratives about biblical figures and the lives of early Christian saints as well as saints from Coptic and Ethiopian sources. The text organized the hagiographical accounts of over one thousand holy men and women according to the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar, which has thirteen months, and assigned several saints to each day (Budge 1928; Guidi 1911).<sup>8</sup> The lives ranged in length from a few lines to multiple pages, and drew on a wide variety of sources including the Old and New Testaments, Coptic traditions, and local legends. Scholars posit that the text originated in Greek and Syriac sources and existed in Coptic and Arabic versions before it was translated into Ge'ez, the written Ethiopian language.<sup>9</sup> Based on manuscript evidence, the earliest Ethiopian translation occurred in the late fourteenth century and simply copied the lives of saints venerated by Coptic Christians (Budge 1928). As the document circulated throughout Ethiopia, however, scribes added local saints to the compilation, and it quickly gained a distinctly Ethiopian viewpoint.

Over time, this collection of saints' lives became part of the liturgy in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and was read aloud during the service. Significantly, the work's inclusion in the church's liturgy allowed the saints' lives to reach a wider audience. The manuscripts preserved today take up hundreds of leaves, which corresponded to a high production cost in the fifteenth century. Most ordinary Christians would not have had access to these narratives if they were not read aloud, but the place of the saints' lives in the liturgy allowed these stories to shape the conceptions of conversion and sanctity for Ethiopian Christians. Although the text included non-Ethiopian saints, the *Book of the Saints* was widely copied and exists in a number of manuscripts today as a testament to its significance for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

In regard to conversion, the overwhelming majority of the saints' lives contained in *The Book of the Saints* fall into one of two categories.<sup>10</sup> The first type includes no description of a conversion experience. These entries either deal with appointment to positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy or relate the life of a holy man or woman who accepted and followed the faith seemingly from birth. This is not to say that these men and women did not undergo a conversion experience of some kind, only that the entry for their life does not include a description of that conversion that can be examined on the basis of gender. An example of this lack of conversion narrative can be found on the twenty-eighth of the month of Miyazya in the life of Saint Melius. The beginning of the entry relates, "On this day Saint Melius became a martyr. This holy man was a strenuous ascetic and fighter, and one who kept vigil all the days of his life . . ." (Budge 1928). The remainder of the text explains the story of his martyrdom at the hands of two pagan princes and includes several miracles as evidence of his holiness. The entry does not, however, explain who converted the saint to the faith, which is the specific focus of this paper. Like the life of Saint Melius, a substantial number of the saints' lives in *The Book of the Saints* lead the reader to assume the conversion of their subjects. The text, therefore, does not include a conversion

<sup>8</sup> The *Book of the Saints* is alternatively referred to in scholarship as the Ethiopian *Synaxarium* or *Senkessar*. For the sake of consistency, I will refer to the text as *The Book of the Saints* throughout the paper. Although his dating has been challenged, for more information on the background of the text and its sources see (Guidi 1911).

<sup>9</sup> Today, the official language in Ethiopia is Amharic, and Ge'ez has been relegated to a liturgical language with a use similar to that of Latin in the Roman Catholic Church.

<sup>10</sup> A portion of the entries in *The Book of the Saints* commemorate biblical events or stories such as Christ's ascension or the life of Abraham and Sarah. Most of these biblical accounts were excluded from consideration as "conversion narratives" on the basis that they do not explicitly address the conversion experience of the biblical figure. A select few dealing with Paul's missionary activity do appear in the paper's calculations, namely, St. Timothy, St. Onesimus, and St. Dionysius.

narrative that can be analyzed through its intersection with gender. Without an explicit description of the conversion experience, conclusions cannot be drawn regarding the agent of conversion.

Another significant portion of the saints' lives represented in *The Book of the Saints* features the faith of a saint's parents. In several instances, a particular saint's mother and father both believed in Christ and the reader can infer that they raised the holy man or woman as a Christian. The life of Abraham the anchorite on the thirtieth of Tekemt serves as an example. His account opens, "On this day died the holy father, the fighter who prayed always, Abraham the anchorite. This holy man was a native of the city of Manuf, and his parents feared God, and served Christ, and they were exceedingly rich in the possessions of this world. When he had grown to man's estate, this holy man wished to put on the garb of the ascetic life" (Budge 1928). Abraham did not suffer martyrdom, but led an extreme version of the ascetic life, eating only a few beans every night and dressing in rags. Again, the text did not include an explicit conversion narrative. It can be assumed that the parents passed their faith to the holy man, but little to no attention is given to this part of the story. In an effort to maintain a level of scholarly rigor, the conclusions regarding the agent of conversion in this paper will be based on clear conversion descriptions rather than the assumptions necessary in this type of account. Due to the concerns highlighted in both of the categories of conversion considered above, these instances will not be analyzed in the remainder of the paper.

After removing the two types of entries enumerated above, sixty-one explicit conversion narratives remained. Statistically, *The Book of the Saints* depicted men and women as agents of conversion at a similar rate. Of the sixty-one conversion narratives identified in the text, twenty-five of the saints were converted by men, while twenty-three of the saints were converted by women. The gender of the agent of conversion for two of the saints was not specified in the account; one involved a group of children, and the other saint converted after observing the steadfastness of several Christian martyrs. The remaining eleven saints converted either through a direct experience with God or after witnessing a miracle. This breakdown illustrates the possibility of someone experiencing conversion without human agency, but the overwhelming majority of saints converted through their interaction with another person. The text did not limit a Christian from converting someone else on the basis of gender, including an almost equal number of representations of men and women as the agent of conversion.

While the text did present men and women as equally capable of converting someone else, a closer examination of these stories reveals that their participation as agents of conversion was still gendered. After analyzing the relationship between the believer and the convert, stark differences based on gender emerge. Not including those saints converted by God's direct intervention or the two agents of unspecified gender, twenty-seven saints had no prior relationship with the believer who converted them to Christianity. Conversely, twenty-one saints experienced conversion as a result of their personal relationship with a believer, often a family member or friend. Of those who were converted by someone they already knew, the agent of conversion in one instance was a male friend, one was the saint's father, and another was converted by a female nurse. The other eighteen saints who came to faith through someone they had a prior relationship with were converted by female family members, such as their mother, daughter, sister, or wife. The conclusions of this analysis hold significance for the discussion of conversion in relation to gender.

Based on the data from *The Book of the Saints*, a male believer had an existing relationship with the person he converted only twice.<sup>11</sup> This means that, of the twenty-five men identified as agents of conversion in the text, twenty-three of them had no prior connection to the person they converted. In contrast, nineteen of the twenty-three women represented as agents of conversion in the text had some sort of history with the person they converted, often through a familial relationship.<sup>12</sup> Although *The Book of the Saints* represented men and women as agents of conversion almost equally from a

<sup>11</sup> The only two male believers who had a prior relationship with the person they converted were the male friend and the father mentioned previously.

<sup>12</sup> This number includes the eighteen female family members and the female nurse.



numerical perspective, the depiction remained gendered as men were more likely to convert a stranger whereas women more frequently converted someone they already knew.

Not only were men more likely to convert a stranger, but they almost always had the opportunity to convert someone because of their ecclesiastical position or reputation for teaching. On the fifteenth of Hamle, *The Book of the Saints* commemorates the death of Ephraim the Syrian. This saint's father was a pagan priest who worshiped idols and despised the Christian faith. Ephraim left his father's house and traveled to the nearby bishop, Abba Jacob, "who admonished him, taught him, and baptized him with Christian baptism" (Budge 1928). Ephraim and Abba Jacob did not have a relationship beforehand, but Ephraim sought him out because of his position as a bishop. In a similar story, Saint Ablarius was raised by pagan parents. He loved learning, but his hometown could not provide him with the education he desired, so he moved to Alexandria. He learned from experts in several areas until "a divine zeal moved within him to learn the doctrine of the church, and he enquired for the books of the church and certain men gave them to him, and he read them and understood them" (Budge 1928). The archbishop of Alexandria, Iskander, explained the more obscure texts to him, allowing him to understand the faith and be baptized. Iskander encountered Ablarius and converted him to Christianity through his official position as bishop. In both cases, membership in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the church situated Jacob and Iskander as agents of conversion.

Other men had the opportunity to convert strangers through their reputation for teaching. A pagan king brought Saint George to his palace to pray and read the psalms because he was known as a great Christian teacher. After Saint George finished speaking, the king's wife, Queen Alexandra, "asked him to interpret them [the psalms] to her, and he interpreted them and made clear to her the Godhead of our Lord Jesus Christ; and his words entered her heart and she believed on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Budge 1928). Her husband, however, continued to worship idols, and Saint George laughed at him. When the king came to his wife for comfort after being embarrassed by the saint, she admonished him for opposing the Christians. Enraged, the king tortured her until she received martyrdom. The text presents George as a recognized teacher who had the opportunity to convert the queen as a result of his reputation.

Men who converted others to the faith sometimes offered instruction whether it was solicited or not, as in the case of Saint Pelagia. According to the text for the eleventh of Tekemt, Saint Pelagia and her parents followed a pagan faith, leading her to a corrupt lifestyle. Pelagia lived in a brothel, played the tambourine, sang and danced, and entertained the people (Budge 1928). A bishop and holy man named Paul found her and rebuked her lifestyle, reminding her of the eternal punishment that awaited her. After his condemnation, "she believed on our Lord Christ through him, and she confessed to him everything which she had done, and he encouraged her, and taught her not to despair through repentance, and the mercy of God" (Budge 1928). Paul had no prior relationship with Pelagia, but when he witnessed her wicked lifestyle, his reputation as a holy man allowed him to censure her, which led to her conversion. Almost all of the men represented in the text as agents of conversion occupied a position within the church structure or had a reputation for teaching. They did not convert individuals with whom they had a personal relationship; instead, conversion occurred as a result of the public nature of their preaching or teaching.

In contrast, women rarely converted strangers through preaching or teaching. Instead, women in the text utilized their personal relationships when they participated as agents of conversion. On the twenty-third of Hamle, *The Book of the Saints* honors the martyrdom of Saint Marina. According to the text, Saint Marina was the daughter of the pagan emperor Decius. Her mother died when she was only five years old, so her father entrusted her to a nurse outside the city. The nurse was a Christian and taught Marina everything about the faith (Budge 1928). After her nurse told her stories about believers who remained steadfast in the face of martyrdom, Marina wanted to follow their example and was martyred by an unbelieving governor. In this example, the Christian nurse utilized her close personal relationship with Marina to convert her to faith in Christ. Women participated in conversion without

holding official positions or being recognized as impressive teachers. Their contributions to Christian conversion developed as an extension of their jobs or familial relationships.

As noted above, familial bonds constituted a significant portion of women's participation as agents of conversion in Ethiopian saints' lives. Seventy-eight percent of the women identified as agents of conversion brought a family member to faith. For instance, Saint Pelarianus was converted by his wife. *The Book of the Saints* commemorates his martyrdom on the twenty-sixth of Khedar. Pelarianus and his parents were pagans, and they married him to the daughter of a rich noble who was also a Christian. They entered the marriage chamber and "as soon as she saw that he loved her dearly she began to reveal to him the faith of Christ, and he believed through her, and was baptized with Christian baptism" (Budge 1928). Kilkeya, the wife of Pelarianus, successfully converted her new husband in part because of their personal relationship. Furthermore, unlike the examples where men were the agents of conversion, these women participated in conversion in a private rather than public setting. Kilkeya introduced Pelarianus to the faith in a private, intimate setting by leveraging their close relationship through marriage.

Female family members also played an important role in two stories where men converted to another faith and were encouraged to return to Christianity. The story of Saint James "the chopped" is included on the twenty-seventh of Khedar. James served as a soldier for the son of the king of Persia. They became close friends, and James began worshiping the Persian gods and participating in Persian religious practices. When his mother, wife, and sister heard that he had abandoned Christianity for the Persian gods, they wrote him a furious letter threatening to cut ties with him if he persisted in his new faith (Budge 1928). The letter severely affected James, and he left the service of the king in order to return to Christianity. When the king found out, he tortured James by individually chopping off his fingers and toes before dividing the rest of his body into thirty-two pieces, hence his strange moniker. The threat of abandonment from the women in his family provided James with the resolve to convert back to Christianity despite the consequences. Women's words, though informal and personal, brought about his conversion.

In a similar story, Saint Dioscurus returned to Christianity after converting to Islam because of a letter from his sister. After hearing about her brother's new Muslim faith, she wrote, "I would rather that news had come to me telling me that thou hadst died a Christian . . . than that this news of thee which hath reached me, telling me that thou art not dead, and that thou hast abandoned the Faith of Christ, thy God" (Budge 1928). She severed all ties with her brother, which caused him great grief, so Saint Dioscurus chose to convert back to Christianity and face martyrdom. As demonstrated by these two examples, the words of female family members exerted a great deal of influence and brought about the conversion of numerous saints in *The Book of the Saints*.

Wives, daughters, and sisters all appeared as agents of conversion in at least one saint's life, but the most significant familial relationship represented in the text was that of mother. Of the eighteen saints converted by a female family member, twelve of them became Christians through the efforts of their mother. In fact, *The Book of the Saints* credits a mother with the conversion of one of the most famous Christian saints. On the twenty-eighth of the month of Magabit, the text commemorates Saint Constantine, the first Christian emperor (Budge 1928). His mother Helena was a Christian and "she brought him up very piously . . . and she sowed in his heart mercy and compassion for the Christians, but she did not dare to have him baptized with Christian baptism" out of fear of his father (Budge 1928). Following his later vision of the cross and subsequent victories, Constantine received baptism and enacted legislation favorable to Christians. Significantly, the text credits his mother Helena with introducing him to the faith and instilling in him a positive view towards Christianity. Women had considerable opportunity to convert their children through their role as mothers, yet their participation in conversion remained informal and within the private sphere.

Of the twenty-three women identified as agents of conversion, only one provides an exception to this gendered public/private distinction. On the twenty-fifth of the month of Hamle, *The Book of the Saints* commemorates Saint Thecla (Budge 1928). Thecla heard Paul preaching through an open

window and converted, yet another example of the pattern of impersonal conversions when a man was the agent of conversion. She defied her parents to follow the teachings of Paul, and her own mother cried out for Thecla to be tortured as an example to other young noblewomen not to convert to Christianity. She miraculously endured the tortures and escaped, preaching the faith everywhere she went. Unlike most of the women considered thus far, Thecla taught publicly about Christianity to people with whom she had no prior relationship. Towards the end of her story, however, she returned to her own city and successfully converted both of her parents. Despite preaching and teaching publicly, the text still represented Thecla as an agent of conversion within her own family.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate how women often converted those they already knew, especially through familial relationships. Women's participation in conversion activities largely remained within the private sphere; few women represented in *The Book of the Saints* preached publicly like Saint Thecla. These personal relationships provided women with the opportunity to act as agents of conversion. In contrast, almost all of the men depicted as agents of conversion were either part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy or widely recognized for their teaching ability. Men participated in conversion through their public roles as preachers and teachers and often converted someone with whom they had no prior relationship. Although the text acknowledged women's ability to convert others and included them as agents of conversion nearly as often as men, the representation remained gendered. In conclusion, this paper will consider how this gendered representation in the *Book of the Saints* connects to larger scholarly conversations about conversion in the history of Christianity.

#### 4. Conclusions

In her widely read work *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, Dana Robert makes several key observations about women and the Christian faith. First, Christianity is predominately a women's religion with women making up the majority of active believers. Second, across all denominations, the majority of missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were women. Yet Robert writes, "because the priests, preachers, theologians, public leaders, and famous missionary entrepreneurs are typically male, the crucial roles of women in mission remain buried in the unwritten stories of human relationships" (Robert 2009). Denied access to institutional positions throughout most of Christian history, women utilized personal interactions as a means to spread the faith. These interpersonal relationships formed the core of women's participation in the movement of the Christian religion.

Until recently, women's contributions to Christian missionary activity remained overlooked in the standard mission histories (Neill 1964). Robert and other scholars have begun to remedy this exclusion by recovering the critical activities of women on the mission field. Their research focuses on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when women participated as missionaries in an official capacity. This chronological limitation stems in part from a lack of source material; women do not frequently appear in traditional missionary sources for earlier time periods. In an attempt to overcome this methodological hurdle, this paper moved outside traditional sources and employed hagiography to analyze women's roles in the spread of Christianity prior to the missionary movement of the previous two centuries. As a case study, this paper examined *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* and argued that the text portrayed women as agents of conversion largely through their personal relationships.

The translated nature of *The Book of the Saints* adds a layer of complexity when trying to ascertain what these hagiographies can communicate about medieval Ethiopian Christianity. Although most of the saints' lives were neither written nor compiled by Ethiopians, the text's incorporation into the liturgy and evidence of widespread acceptance in the number of surviving copies indicates that the stories appealed to and resonated with Ethiopian Christians. The adoption of *The Book of the Saints* suggests that the saints' lives aligned with the Ethiopian Christian imagination. The conversion narratives considered here show that space existed in the Ethiopian Christian imagination for women to participate in the spread of Christianity, which perhaps reflects the historical reality of women's



roles in Ethiopian Christianity more broadly. According to writings attributed to a fifteenth-century Ethiopian king, Zä'ra Ya'eqob, women could not serve as priests but could become nuns (Herman 2020). Furthermore, the laity, both men and women, were expected to receive the same instruction in the faith. Very little information exists about women from this period, especially non-elite women, yet these hagiographies that depict women as active participants in the faith, albeit within the private sphere, were accepted as part of the Ethiopian tradition. Perhaps these stories resonated with the historical reality of women's exclusion from the ecclesiastical hierarchy while maintaining their ability to wield religious influence and authority.

In regard to conversion specifically, *The Book of the Saints* represented men and women as almost equally likely to be agents of conversion, but their participation remained gendered. Men were more likely to convert someone with whom they had no prior relationship, whereas women usually converted someone they already knew, often a family member. Men participated in conversion in the public arena, while women's activities remained in the private sphere. These observations about the gendered representation in conversion narratives in *The Book of the Saints* mirror the pattern uncovered by contemporary scholars of mission history like Robert. Although hagiography remains a difficult source for scholars to work with, it can reveal interesting points of connection and overlap with historical reality. The women represented in the text participated in conversion through human relationships rather than institutional positions, much like the female missionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, further underscoring the critical role women played in the spread of Christianity.

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