

The Female Standard: Evaluating Cultural Expectations for Women in Scripture and Politics

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Women in America are evaluated by a different set of standards than their male counterparts in every context from the home to the workplace. Politics is no exception. The 2020 Democratic Primary buzzed with the question “Is she electable?” of the female candidates. The challenge of this question is a suspicion of these women’s competence not faced by male candidates. More is expected of female candidates. As rights, freedoms, and opportunities for women progress, I urge us to question how interpretation of Biblical texts may be holding women back. Robin L. Owens writes, “because of the Bible’s historical, cultural, and religious authority, it has been one of the most prominent avenues through which a woman’s purpose, possibilities, promise, and place in society have been defined.”¹ The following analysis will survey Americans’ attitudes toward the electability of a woman, and then turn to the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10.38-42 as a case study about perceptions of women’s performance in their roles at different periods of exegesis. When gender is a lens of evaluating performance (i.e. success in the role), women in the Bible, just like women in all their roles in American society, are judged by more severely.

¹ Robin L. Owens, "Scriptures and identity formation: transgressing the boundaries of disciplinary readings," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 2 (2013): 141.

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The Electability of Women in 2020

The race for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination began with the party's most diverse pool of candidates² and ended with a nominee who looks a lot like presidents throughout American history. This is not surprising given that many voters prioritized defeating the incumbent president over supporting a candidate with whom they most align on issues of policy.³ The problem with "electability" as a major factor in one's voting decision is that it sets aside logic and agency in voting for assumptions of others' preferences. Danielle Kurtzleben of NPR reported, "Only 33% of likely voters of any party said they thought their neighbors would be comfortable with a female president."⁴ Assumptions by voters about how their "neighbors" were likely to vote defeated the female Democratic candidates on the basis of their gender.

What makes a woman "not electable"? A 2013 study⁵ in *Political Behavior* evaluated the relationship between the gender of a political candidate and amounts and types of information for which voters search during a campaign. The hypothesis was that gender indirectly impacts voting by means of the information sought about candidates. The study found that participant search patterns were "consistent with gender based stereotypes,"⁶ which they quantified as a greater interest in the competency of a female candidate and her positions on compassion-related issues compared to the interest shown in male candidates on these measures. The study reported,

² Danielle Kurtzleben, "Did Gender Keep Democratic Women From Winning The Presidential Primary?" *NPR*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/17/818952460/did-gender-keep-democratic-women-from-winning-the-primary>.

³ An Ipsos/Daily Beast Poll from June 2019 reported that 82% of Democratic and Independent voters said that it is important to them that the Democratic Party nominate a candidate who can beat Donald Trump. 66% of those polled rated this criteria for a candidate as "very important." Chris Jackson and Emily Chen, "Nominating Woman or Minority Come Second to Nominating Candidate Who Can Beat Trump," *Ipsos*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/nominating-woman-or-minority-come-second-to-nominating-candidate-who-can-beat-trump>.

⁴ Kurtzleben.

⁵ Ditonto, Tessa M, Hamilton, Allison J, and Redlawsk, David P, "Gender Stereotypes, Information Search, and Voting Behavior in Political Campaigns," *Political Behavior* 36, no. 2 (2013): 335–58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-013-9232-6>.

⁶ Ditonto, Hamilton, and Redlawsk, 355.

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“voters examined more competence-related information for female candidates than for males.”⁷

These results suggest not only that female candidates were held to a higher standard of competence, but also that female candidates were expected to fit into a different role (compassion issues) than male candidates. The greater interest in competence-related information suggests that voters needed more evidence to evaluate a female candidate as successful in her role (i.e. a viable candidate) than male candidates.

Martha and Mary in the History of Interpretation

While the roots of perceptions about women’s electability are complex, one can see a similar thread in the history of interpretation of Biblical stories featuring women in prominent roles. One example is the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10.38-42, a history of interpretation which illustrates how power structures and the agendas of those in power have transposed this story from one that spoke to all disciples (without primary consideration of gender) into the realm of a “women’s story.” When gender became the principal lens of interpretation, Martha turned out to be much less successful in her role as a disciple.

Interpretation of this story bent to the agenda of those who wished not to see women in roles outside the home. In Medieval legend, Martha was a dragon-slaying missionary. She was a “powerful preacher and miracle worker who wins a whole town over to the gospel,” summarized Jennifer Wyant in her book *Beyond Martha or Mary: Reclaiming Models of Discipleship*, which surveys the history of interpretation of the Martha and Mary story.⁸ Contrary to more modern interpretations of Martha, Wyant writes, “[Martha] is not depicted as whiny or bossy. Rather, she

⁷ Ditonto, Hamilton, and Redlawsk, 346.

⁸ Jennifer S. Wyant, *Beyond Mary or Martha: Reclaiming Ancient Models of Discipleship* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 202.

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is the epitome of a disciple of Christ.”⁹ By the time of the Protestant Reformation, though, Martha, for Martin Luther, is at the same time performing the rightful actions of women and is an example of one who worked for her salvation.¹⁰ Martha, once successful in her role as a disciple, now fails as a woman—she is diametrically opposed to the doctrine of *justificatio sola fide*. Luther preached that it is the punishment to women through Eve that women ought to “sit at home.” Although, Luther says, “[women] naturally seek to gain what they have lost through sin,” he concludes that women “cannot perform the functions of men, teach, rule, etc.”¹¹ Luther’s critique anticipates the problem people face today in interpreting this text. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza articulates the problem well: it “denigrates women’s work while insisting at the same time that housework and hospitality are women’s proper roles.”¹² This shift in interpretation from the Medieval period to early modernity brought with it a harsher judgment of Martha.

The story of Martha and Mary need not be interpreted as a “women’s story” which pits one against another to illustrate the proper way to embody womanhood. During the Patristic period, Cyril of Alexandria read this story as Jesus setting himself forth as an example of how to be received as a guest. This pericope falls into a portion of the Lukan narrative that scholars tend to call the Travel Narrative (9.51-19.44). As Jesus traveled to Jerusalem, he instructed his followers in the ways of discipleship. The Christian message in the early church was spread by traveling missionaries, and good disciples needed to know how to show proper hospitality. For Cyril, Martha was not criticized for her work. Cyril encouraged modest hospitality. He reasons,

⁹ Wyant, 202.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 23:247. N.B. This is not the first time that the story of Martha and Mary was interpreted as an allegory for the active and contemplative life. Martha had long been viewed as one demonstrated the active life of faith. This shift has taken the active-contemplative dichotomy out of the realm of monastic discussion which addressed discipleship for both men and women.

¹¹ Luther, 1:202-3.

¹² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Arachne – Weaving the Word” in *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 69.

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“For every where and in every thing excess is injurious. For often it produces hesitation in those who otherwise would be glad to receive strangers, and causes but few [houses] to be found fit for the purpose.”¹³ In a way, Jesus was telling Martha that she was too generous, and he, as her guest, did not need as much as she was preparing. If her abundant hospitality had been praised, others might shy away from the service of hospitality, feeling unworthy in comparison. Martha is not shamed by this reading. Cyril is just one example of an early reading of this text that viewed Martha as an important and praiseworthy example of proper discipleship.

Gendered and Non-Gendered Exegesis

When the story of Mary and Martha is directed towards women today, it is often proclaimed as an example of how women need to be reminded that “sitting at the feet of Jesus” so-to-speak is more important than all the busy-work Martha chooses. Through this lens, Martha jealously nags Jesus as if she needs his approval and praise at the expense of her sister. Loveday Alexander summarizes the content of sermons on this text from male preachers in her experience. She writes, “Martha was ‘fussing’, they say, looking down from the pulpit on to their predominantly female audience, about female concerns: ‘and we all know’, they add, before going home to their well-cooked Sunday dinners, ‘how women do fuss.’”¹⁴ Women are left to feel shamed by the implication that they themselves are also rebuked by Jesus because many women identify with Martha in her role as a diligent worker and generous host.

As this story became a “women’s story,” the standards by which Martha was assessed become unforgiving. Martha and Mary represent two different ways of embodying womanhood.

¹³ Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, “Homily 69,” in *Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke*, (United States: Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983), 292.

¹⁴ Loveday C. Alexander, “Sisters in Adversity: Retelling Martha’s Story” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 199.

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By placing these two women in competition against one another as examples of female discipleship, the commendation of Mary, through this gendered reading, could only come at the denigration of Martha. How different this story would read if it were still considered to be a teaching moment for all disciples, and it carried with it the legends of Martha the traveling missionary who slayed dragons. Her legacy might be more like Peter who is celebrated even though he denied Jesus three times. Instead, this is a “women’s story” in which Martha fails as a disciple in this moment and comes to represent the failure of women who are “fussy.”

When gender is introduced as an interpretive lens, the tendency to judge women harshly becomes apparent. Martha is held to a higher standard when this story is meant to teach women how to act. Interpretations of the story of Martha and Mary, like that of Cyril, were much more charitable towards Martha when she was set forth as an example of discipleship meant to instruct all disciples both men and women equally.

Conclusion: Re-Interpreting Electability

When women entered the race for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, the stakes were raised. The election exposed a collective reluctance to trust the competency of women in leadership. The question “Is she electable?” revealed a blatant demand for these women to earn their place to simply be acknowledged as candidates that was not asked of the men. The greater interest in competence-related information in the *Political Behavior* study supports a conclusion that there is a pattern in American society of measuring the success of a woman in her role by a different, more stringent set of standards than men. In other words, voters needed more evidence of a woman’s competence as a political candidate than they required to positively evaluate male candidates.

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In the case study of patterns of exegesis in Luke 10.38-42, one can also see that Martha as a model of discipleship in general was evaluated more positively than Martha as an example of female discipleship. Martha is a well-intentioned disciple when Cyril interprets Jesus's rebuke to Martha as corrective but not shameful. She receives a constructive teaching from Jesus, but she is still held as a model of discipleship in the reception of this story. After Luther presented Martha as one who misunderstands the gospel within her role as a woman, she starts to become viewed more negatively. She performs the role expected of women, but she does not meet the expectations of a holy woman.

Martha and Mary in Luke remains a "women's story" teaching of Martha's failure as a disciple. This trajectory of interpretation has persisted. The performance of women in both cases is measured by a higher standard. The exegetical lenses we bring to Biblical texts are reflections of the power structures and agendas of our culture. Acknowledgement of the biases imposed on the text can help to dispel the negative effects of such prejudices. While this is not an analysis of a cause-and-effect relationship, the purpose of this comparison has been to reveal a similar pattern between two of society's culture-shaping forces – politics and religion. Cultural change is not a science, but perhaps if we cease to hold the women of the Bible to a higher standard than the men, we might also contribute to liberating American women from the shackles of this hypocrisy.

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