Biblical Literalism and Gender: Impositions Upon American Women from the 16th to 20th Centuries

by Morgan Koo, Irvine Valley College
Professor Brittany Adams

Throughout American history, the Bible has been used in dominating Christian narratives to outline the societal expectations of women; however, the teachings have not been consistent in terms of female morality, piety, spirituality, and domesticity. Women were parallelled to various, condemned archetypes up until the 18th century, in order to subject them under the complete authority and jurisdiction of men. By the time of American independence, women's stereotypes and societal obligations were completely swapped, perceived to be inherently moral. Domestic work continued to be considered a feminine role throughout the 1900s, though American society placed greater emphasis on female domesticity in post-war periods. There was a heavy push towards traditional values in the 1920s and 1970s as backlash against secularizing gender norms. It was not until the late 20th century that Christians began to adopt complementarianism, an idea in which men and women were perceived to have different but complementary roles. The ongoing shifts within Christian gender ideology suggests that the perceived women's natural state of being as well as societal duties were socially constructed rather than obligations within hard set belief systems. Despite ambivalence in women's true role, the main constant throughout dominating American Christian narratives was a power imbalance in which women always played a secondary or subordinate role.

Though Puritans had immigrated to the New World in search of religious freedom and purification from the Church of England, English influences and a continuation of certain ideas were inevitable within early American teachings. Among these were the likening of contemporary women to Eve and Jezebel, biblical figures that were shunned for their seduction of man towards sin, and ultimately destruction. In 1549, Hugh Latimer, a Protestant bishop, expressed the difficulty "for a man to rule one wide rightly and inordinately" and used those two women to advise King Edward to:

> … choose unto him a godly wife, whereby he shall the better live chaste; and in so living, all godliness shall increase, and righteousness be maintained … Let the king therefore choose a wife which feareth God; let him not seek a proud wanton, and one full of rich treasures and worldly pomp [1]

The narrative that the "woman is frail, and proclive unto all evils … a very weak vessel" perpetuated the depiction of woman as a fated temptress or seducer while also infantilizing them, and raised the need for men to properly guard both themselves, and these weaker women, against worldly temptations. Due to women's moral and intellectual inferiority, men were expected to rule over society and their wives in order to maintain morality, religiosity, and the safety of all. On this rationale, women of Western Europe had no power, devoid of property or legal rights and often victims of violence; this patriarchal system was institutionalized into churches, family structures, and the state.[2]

Puritans of early colonial America shared similar, degrading views of women, also relying on biblical texts to legitimize their claims. They continued to be viewed as easily tempted but also tempting, and made to redeem themselves by playing a supportive role in the lives of men, while the failure to do so led to heavy

[1] Latimer, Hugh. 1549. *The First Sermon preached before King Edward, March 8, 1549.*

[2] Brittany Adams, "Lecture 2. Pre-European Contact Period (1500s-1600s)," HIST 51H: Women in American History Honors (Lecture, Irvine Valley College, Irvine, CA, January 24, 2023).

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condemnation. At the marriage of John Clark and Elizabeth Woodbridge, Puritan clergyman John Cotton gave a wedding sermon in which he preached the need for all men to have a “meet help” despite women being the weaker vessels,[3] and that woman was made to be subject to men, drawing from the scripture of women, “being made *for man out of man, after man,* and yet falling before him.” [4] Sin and misery, according to interpreted scriptures, was brought by the first woman, Eve; Puritans believed that this gave another woman, the Virgin Mary, the “*Glory* of bringing into the World that *Second Adam,*” namely Jesus, the savior of the world.[5] Early colonial women continued to be attributed with Eve’s greater temptations and an inability to restrain themselves; however, they were pushed to take the opportunity to redeem themselves by playing the role Eve was originally given and embody Mary through her sacrifice in caring for Jesus by serving men. Those who failed to become proper meet helps were viewed as, “an affliction and scourge to man, [perverting] the Order of God, and nature.”[6] These narratives would create great pressure for women to serve others and behave modestly, to hide their “inherent” tendencies towards immorality; meanwhile, men would assume a right to women’s servitude and submission. When put into consideration the Puritan’s strict belief in the “elect,” or predestination, it would have been crucial for these early Americans to behave in whatever role was pleasing to God and ensure that there would be no sign of damnation.[7]

Claims of encounters with angels were among these signs of damnation, but they were invariably associated with women and these incidents were labeled as demonic delusions rather than divine intervention. This was credited to the woman’s weaker physical body and fragile souls.[8] With the Puritan logic of women as more susceptible to “devilish influences,” all reports of these angelic encounters were deemed Satanic; however, there was more alarm in these claims because men rarely had reports of these spiritual communications. [9] Increase Mather reasoned, "if those White Angels appear to Females only, who are the weaker Sex, and more easy to be imposed on, that renders the case yet the more suspicious … if ever an Age for Angelical Apparitions shall come, no question but men, and not women only will be honoured with their Visage."[10] Experiences of women were largely disregarded as they were deemed untrustworthy and weak-minded, only validated when supported by the higher reasoning of men.

Towards the 1700s, there was a dramatic shift in perceptions of female morality. Previously associated with the original sin, need of protection, and temptation, women of the 18th century gained new archetypes to associate themselves with that allowed them to enjoy a more pious though still subservient image. While women were uplifted in a sense, men still held authority over them and the rights to their service. Women’s spiritual and societal promotion was demonstrated by Cotton Mather’s “Tabitha Rediviva”:

> As far as we can Learn, the first Believer on our Savior, that was in the World, was, A Woman [Mary]. And that brave Wo being styled, The Mother of all the Living, it has induced Lear Men to conceive, that EVE was, by being the First of them all peculiar

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[3] John Cotton. 1699. “A Meet Help: Or, A Wedding Sermon.” Transcript of speech delivered at New-Castle in New England, June 19, 1694: 15.

[4] Ibid., 23

[5] Lonna M. Malmsheimer, “Daughters of Zion: New England Roots of American Feminism.” *The New England Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1977): 490. https://doi.org/10.2307/364280.

[6] Cotton, “A Meet Help: Or, A Wedding Sermon,” 23.

[7] Reis, Elizabeth. “Immortal Messengers: Angels, Gender, and Power in Early America.” In *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, edited by NANCY ISENBERG and ANDREW BURSTEIN, 163–75. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

[8] Ibid., 164

[9] Elizabeth Lowry. “Spiritual (R)Evolution and the Turning of Tables: Abolition, Feminism, and the Rhetoric of Social Reform in the Antebellum Public Sphere.” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.14321/jstudradi.9.2.0001.

[10] Increase Mather, 1696. “Disquisition concerning angelical apparitions.” Transcript of speech delivered at Boston, 1696: 17.

> manner, the Mother of all that Live unto God; and she was on this Account... a Mother to her own Husband, an the Instrument of bringing him to Believe in the Great deemer. [11]

Mather gave Eve a more positive attribution in connecting her with her later predecessor and daughter, Mary, who birthed the Savior of the world; her first sin diminishes when put in context of the good news of the New Testament.[12]

No longer negatively associated with figures such as Eve, women were encouraged to identify with figures less threatening or powerful, such as that of Lazarus' sisters, to depict women as inherently more pious while still maintaining a power differential.[13] Though women were previously silenced under male authority and higher intellect, the shift in perceptions of women as pious and associations with these less prominent biblical figures pushed women into passive roles. For instance, Lazarus's sister, Mary, was known for her desire to spend time with Jesus while Martha busied herself with the maintenance of the house, or domestic sphere. Mary, in particular, never took an assertive role, simply choosing to listen and be in the company of Jesus. Placing these women as models for 18th century women would set an expectation to serve and be pious. In addition, ministers pushed women towards modesty and subordination while also giving them opportunities to actively work for the public good, a change to which women responded enthusiastically. This led to further praise in which ministers would further emphasize the women's "superior moral sense" adding to their stature.[14] The new image gave women some semblance of pride in their gendered identities to encourage them to find a sense of enjoyment or meaning within their subordination to men. These archetypes would have been highly effective within a religious community in pressuring women to continue the behaviors of the limited positive representations of women within scriptures, refusal to demonstrate piety and submission would have brought shame, public disapproval, and fear of eternal damnation. However, the emphasis of such archetypes and such a passive role would come to an end as America faced revolutionary changes and women exercised greater independence and responsibility.

With the turn of the century came the Cult of True Womanhood as well as the Second Great Awakening. America had undergone drastic political changes by the 19th century, namely, the independence from Britain through the Revolutionary War. While American men were out at war, many women took on a number of complex roles, including that of the "deputy husband," taking on their absent husband's responsibilities. The term "Republican Motherhood" grew out of a new recognition for women's role as mothers and instilled their ability to shape future citizens through their moral influence, finally separating women from Eve's sin.[15] This newfound admiration for women's morality continued into the mid-1900s and was firmly established through the Cult of True Womanhood, also known as the Cult of Domesticity, which emphasized the "four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."[16]

Religion, or piety, was seen as the woman's strength, more moral than the sinful man and bringing light into the world; women were the "vestal flame of piety, lighted up by Heaven in the breast of women, diffuses its

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[11] Cotton Mather, 1713, '*Tabitha Rediviva:* The good Works of a vertuous Woman described & commended, with some Justice to the Memory of Mrs. *Eliz. Hutchinson*." Transcript of speech delivered at Boston, 1713.

[12] Malsheimer, "Daughters of Zion: New England Roots of American Feminism." 490.

[13] Ibid., 502.

[14] Malsheimer, "Daughters of Zion: New England Roots of American Feminism." 502.

[15] Brittany Adams, " Lecture 4. Revolutionary Legacies on a Gender Basis," HIST 51H: Women in American History Honors (Lecture, Irvine Valley College, Irvine, CA, February 7, 2023).

[16] Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74. https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179.

light and warmth over the world;--and dark would be the world, if it should ever be extinguished and lost."[17] While this was a facet of women's gender expectations in the 1700s, the Revolutionary War had created a heavier emphasis on women's ability to govern the domestic sphere and raise their children to become moral citizens. 18th century women became responsible for the moral upkeep of their households and the world. Many shared the belief that religion was all a woman needed to feel dignity, fulfillment, and happiness.[18] In addition to religiosity, submission was thought to be a woman's strength. Reverend Jonathan F. Stearns emphasized Christian delicacy over beauty, claiming it was woman's defense, glory, and source of power.[19] Ultimately, women were discouraged from assertion as a masculine woman was deemed unattractive. When Sarah and Angelina Grimké actively spoke out as abolitionists, Congregational ministers of Massachusetts criticized their "unwomanly" behavior writing, "the power of woman is in her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection" and that women who assume the place of men as a public reformer, "our care and protection of her seem unnecessary; we put ourselves in self-defense against her … and her character becomes unnatural."[20] In addition, women were expected to care for the sick, especially men, as it would give them a sense of gratification, usefulness, and power in making a man dependent upon her. [21] However, not only in terms of physical health, women were expected to care for men's morality and outbursts. Regardless of their husband's behavior, a woman was expected to maintain her self-control as a "good wife" always presents smiles and a cheerful voice no matter the circumstance; when men are troubled, they are to expect his wife's ears, heart and her soft, nursing hand.[22] As women were praised for their piety and moral superiority, the Cult of Womanhood's additional advocacy of submission and nurturance was an effective and necessary tool in limiting women's autonomy and sustaining the patriarchy.

As for the spiritual aspect, the Great Awakening brought an ease in the constant anxiety, austerity, and denying of self in the Puritan world through the Evangelical emphasis of spirituality and devotion. By the early 1800s, angel sightings, which had once suggested damnation, were now considered extraordinary due to the democratization of religion, offering many church members the opportunity to experience the supernatural. Distinct from the older, harsher ideologies, the visitations of these apparitions were a popularizing Evangelical trend with both male and female believers claiming to have seen angels or been transported to another world, and based on this experience, even preach in front of audiences.[23] While there was a greater appeal towards emotional connections and religious devotion, white female Evangelicals continued to face a number of limitations in terms of their ability to speak in front of an audience, emotional expression, and the gendering of angels. It was deemed inappropriate for women to share their opinions before men, making it necessary for them to find alternatives. While men shared their angelic revelations before a congregation in a "normal state," women were unconscious on the podium as they needed to be, "[controlled] by the spirit of a man—especially

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[17] Ebenezer Bailey. 1834. *The young ladies' class book ; a selection of lessons for reading, in prose and verse.* Electronic reproduction. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard College Library Digital Imaging Group, 2009. 168.

[18] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." 153.

[19] Jonathan French Stearns. 1837. "Female Influence, and the True Christian Mode of Its Exercise: A Discourse" Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, July 30, 1837.

[20] John Greenleaf Whittier. "Pastoral Letter: the General Association of Massachusetts to the Churches Under Their Care." 27 June 1837, Brookfield, Massachusetts.

[21] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." 164.

[22] Gilman, Caroline Howard, 1838. *Recollections of a southern matron*. New-York: Harper & brothers, 1838: 257.

[23]Elizabeth Reis. "Immortal Messengers: Angels, Gender, and Power in Early America." In *Mortal Remains: Death in Early America*, edited by NANCY ISENBERG and ANDREW BURSTEIN, 170. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fj0p5.14.

an educated one—his opinion … was given credence."[24] In addition, despite the rise in favor of emotion, women were still expected to restrain themselves emotionally in order to differentiate themselves from their African American counterparts, who were frequently labeled "inherently passionate and sinful people given to outbursts of emotion." Though women were perceived to be more emotional than men, self-control was still expected from them.[25] Therefore, claims of angel encounters were now deemed acceptable, and even praised; however, in this period of high religiosity, women were limited in their emotional expressions in contrast to men. Moreover, the 1838 American Biblical Repository strictly asserted that angels within scriptures were always male "because the masculine is the more honorable gender."[26]

Though women were uplifted through their "inherent" piety and moral tendencies, the ideals of submission and domesticity restricted women's voice in public and preserved male authority. The inability to speak in public despite their supposed moral standing would suggest either that biblical literalism was held above truth or this praise was ingenuine with underlying intentions. In addition, the suppression of women's emotions may have antecedents to earlier beliefs of women as susceptible to devilish influences or of lower intellect and demonstrates a fragile belief in their piety. However, women did enjoy greater respect and responsibility relative to prior generations. With the secularization of culture in the 1900s, there was an opposite push by Christians that advocated for women's domesticity and "traditional family values."

The Fundamentalist movement arose as a backlash to various secular movements throughout the 20th century, a stricter form of Christianity that engaged in biblical literalism, or biblicism. Passages, such as 1 Peter 2:11-12 and Ephesians 5:22, encouraged conservative Protestants to campaign against the growing gender egalitarianism in the American public and called for women to remain silent within the church, submit to their husbands, and stay away from authority positions over men.[27] Conservative Protestant women would demonstrate their religious devotion by adopting a literalist ideology while men would express devotion by also engaging in literalism but, more importantly, taking positions of authority within the Church, though men would frequently have a lower investment in literalist schemas due to their access to positional authority.[28] Women's superior religiosity was given high importance. Leading Fundamentalist Baptist, Jasper Cortenus Massee, warned that women must be religious or risk destroying her society while Clarence Macartney, a Fundamentalist and conservative Presbyterian pastor, taught that women would either lift men up, or drag them down to the depths.[29] Despite the responsibility to maintain religiosity within the Church, women continued to play secondary roles as biblicism, and gender roles according to Scripture, gained importance within the American Christian community. Through discrete and deferential ways, women were expected to guide their husbands, society, and themselves to lead holy, God-fearing lives. In contrast to 19th century gender ideology, Christian women were no longer viewed to be inherently moral but held to an expectation of morality that would have to be proven by their religious devotion through Church involvement, biblical knowledge, and influence on their husbands; this also meant a decline in women's authority within the

[24]Lowry, Elizabeth. "Spiritual (R)Evolution and the Turning of Tables: Abolition, Feminism, and the Rhetoric of Social Reform in the Antebellum Public Sphere." *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 9. https://doi.org/10.14321/jstudradi.9.2.0001.

[25] Ibid., 8.

[26]Reis, "Immortal Messengers: Angels, Gender, and Power in Early America." 173.

[27] John P. Hoffman, and John P. Bartkowski. "Gender, Religious Tradition and Biblical Literalism." Social Forces 86, no. 3 (2008): 1249. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20430794.

[28] Hoffmann and Bartkowski, "Gender, Religious Tradition and Biblical Literalism." 1264.

[29] Margaret Lamberts Bendroth. "Fundamentalism and Femininity: Points of Encounter between Religious Conservatives and Women, 1919-1935." Church History 61, no. 2 (1992): 226. https://doi.org/10.2307/3168265.

domestic sphere with the continuation of the expectations to be subservient to their husbands and silent in an audience.

From the late 1800s and into the early 1900s, there was a decline in the Victorian family model and a rise in divorce rates, suffrage movement, the “New Woman” ideal, and flapper culture. Fundamentalist leaders promoted the separate spheres ideology and the Victorian model of family, claiming that the home was the social institution that would save both individuals and the nation from falling into sin. It is important to note that the “Christian home” meant white, middle-class, evangelical, and in the nuclear family format.[30] By the 1940s, there were calls by fundamentalist and neo-evangelical leaders to further diminish women’s authority within the home. Around this time came the term “headship” to describe men’s role within the family, particularly as a stress response to social change after World War II. Thus, an increased desire for hierarchy and masculine control developed, even within the domestic sphere. These fundamentalist and neo-evangelical leaders claimed that this arrangement was God’s intent for his creation and necessary to have a functioning family.[31] With the growing feminist movement of the 1970s, conservative evangelicals united around this “common enemy” and blamed it for the rise in abortion, divorce, STDs, and moral decline.[32] Televangelist, Pat Robertson, wrote in a fundraising letter that, “the feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.”[33]

In 1973, Marabel Morgan wrote *Total Woman*, a highly successful self-help book intended for married women. She noted that:

> “I did not say a woman is inferior to man, or even that a woman should be subservient to all men, but that a wife should be under her own husband’s leadership … The fact is that God originally ordained marriage. He gave certain ground rules and if they are applied, a marriage will work ... Man and woman, although equal in status, are different in function. God ordained man to be the head of the family, its president, and his wife to be the executive vice-president”[34]

Morgan went on to explain that a wife’s physical attractiveness is one of the husband’s most basic needs and that it would bring fulfillment to the wife, partner, and their children.[35] Marabel Morgan touched upon the ideas of headship and complementarianism within this passage, a popularizing term in Christian society that went against egalitarianism. Robert Lewis and William Hendricks attempted to draw in egalitarians by arguing against female oppression under male dominance, that too many homes have degenerated into a form of leadership that “contradicts biblical teaching ... The kind of leadership Jesus defines for His followers has to do with: Responsibility, not privilege. Service, not being served. Support, not superiority.”[36] Phyllis Schafly, a major figure of the successful STOP-ERA movement, wrote in her article “Difference, Not Equality,” that the Positive Woman is one who understands the difference between men and women, creating opportunities with her own creative capabilities, rather than imprisoning herself within a negative mind, as the women’s liberationists do.

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[30] Anneke Stasson. “The Politicization of Family Life: How Headship Became Essential to Evangelical Identity in the Late Twentieth Century.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (2014): 101. https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2014.24.1.100.

[31] Ibid., 101.

[32] Ibid., 103.

[33] The Associated Press, “ROBERTSON LETTER ATTACKS FEMINISTS,” The New York Times, August 26, 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/26/us/robertson-letter-attacks-feminists.html.

[34] Morgan Marabel, *Total Woman* (Old Tappan, N.J: Revell, 1973) 112.

[35] Marabel, *Total Woman*, 113-114

[36] Stasson. “The Politicization of Family Life: How Headship Became Essential to Evangelical Identity in the Late Twentieth Century.” 114.

Schalfly calls for women who think the role of child-bearing is unfair to, “take their complaint with God because no other power is capable of changing that fundamental fact.”[37] Others, such as the Baptist Evangelical minister Tim LaHaye, argued that feminism created unnecessary competition between married couples, blurred distinction between the senses, insecurity in everyone, and destroying femininity. He accused feminism and working women to be the two “forces of evil” that attacked the family.[38]

Narratives regarding women’s secondary roles in familial and societal structures were justified and Christians made attempts to appeal to the public using Scripture, claims of God’s original intent, natural states of being, and being the source of true happiness. In all aspects of life, including the domestic, women were reduced to complement the greater authority and ability of men though women of the century prior relatively enjoyed greater authority within the home. These regressions were largely a result of the fear that arose from 1920’s secularism, uncertainty of the post-war period, and the radical changes brought by 1970’s feminism with attempts to protect past traditions and fear of further change.

Both the perceptions and expectations of women in archetypes, morality, domestic authority, and even spiritual expression continually shifted throughout America’s history from the time of Puritan arrival to the modern day. However, each period shared the common denominator of a position inferior to men. Though there was a fluctuation of respect and recognition through more positive biblical archetypes, ideas of “inherent morality,” authority over the domestic sphere, and complementarianism ideology, there has always been a power differential with the main voices and authority figures being male. Perhaps, rather than a purely theological backing to these standards, Christian gender ideology was heavily influenced by the need to maintain patriarchal structures while responding to sudden cultural trends and political events suggesting more subjective, mortal jurisdiction rather than that of the divine. When listening to the claims of authority figures, whether religious or political, it is crucial to interpret their words within a greater context to better identify their intentions.

[37] Phyllis Schlafly, *The Power of the Positive Woman* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1977. 16-19.

[38] Stasson. “The Politicization of Family Life: How Headship Became Essential to Evangelical Identity in the Late Twentieth Century.” 110.