Sarah Moore and her younger sister Angelina Emily are well known for their pioneering work for abolition and women's rights. Sarah, the second daughter and sixth of fourteen children, and Angelina, the youngest, were born to John and Mary Grimke, respected and affluent members of Charleston society. The Grimke sisters received infant baptism in the Protestant Episcopal Church. Though thirteen years separated them, both experienced evangelical conversions in adolescence, facilitated by Presbyterian clergy. A growing maturity of faith, alongside disillusionment as a result of largely lukewarm responses to the sins of slavery, led both to engage the Society of Friends.

The emerging American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) enlisted the Grimke’s participation. The Grimke’s attended the New York gathering in 1836. The AASS, founded in December 1833, sponsored the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women, which held three annual sessions from 1837 to 1839; the Grimke’s attended each. Already beginning to write and speak publicly, the Grimke’s significantly shaped the movement from the mid-1830s, remaining active until 1839.

During their brief careers as agents for the AASS, the Grimke’s wrote copiously for the movement. Angelina Grimke wrote *Appeal to Christian Women of the South* (1836), the response to which was emphatic—from both supporters and detractors. Angelina was invited to attend the AASS Agents’ Convention. Sarah later wrote *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (1838), the first American-authored, fully developed women’s rights argument, ten years before the first women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Sarah's essay first appeared as a series of published pieces in the *New England Spectator* and the *Liberator* in 1837 and 1838, as a response to controversy ignited by a pastoral letter that the Congregational clergy circulated.

Angelina Grimke spends almost half of her *Appeal* in offering a biblical argument against slavery, drawn from both the Old and New Testaments. Giving considerable attention to Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy to discern faithful practices of acquiring, protecting, and even releasing (e.g., Jubilee themes) servants, Angelina offers biblical contrasts to Southern slavery. Looking to Jesus’s example in the Gospels as well as the witness of women throughout the Bible—such as Miriam, Deborah, Jael, Huldah, Esther, Elizabeth, Mary, Anna, and Mary Magdalene—Angelina presents obedience to God as “the doctrine of the Bible” and contrasts that with obedience to “man.” “You must take it up on Christian ground, and fight against it with Christian weapons, whilst your feet are shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (“Appeal,” 26; cf. Eph. 6:15). Upon this biblical foundation, Angelina appeals to women from their sense of Christian duty.

Sarah and Angelina’s focus on the sin of slavery led them to uncover the related sin of woman’s disenfranchisement. In her *Letters*, Sarah outlines a Christian theology and practice for women that includes (1) woman’s reading and interpreting Scripture (preferably in its original languages); (2) an acknowledgment of woman’s equality with man, thereby claiming her evangelistic ministry; (3) an acknowledgment of the oppression of woman, particularly white affluent women, that has resulted in her “vacuity of mind,” necessitating her intellectual cultivation; (4) the notion that through (white affluent) woman’s salvation and holiness, she may confess to her complicity in the sins of racism; and (5) her ministry to the spiritual and material welfare of others, especially slaves. Sarah emphasizes the
need for women to read Scripture in the original languages for the purpose of interpreting the biblical
texts for themselves, rather than relying on male clergy and other ecclesiastical leaders. Sarah's
argument encourages women to read and interpret Scripture through the lens of Enlightenment
ideology, specifically individualism, in response to a selective application of Scripture to the rights and
social constructs attributed to women and people of African descent.

In her strategy to empower women, Sarah draws heavily from the creation and fall narratives in
Genesis, offering alternative readings, yet surveying examples from throughout the Bible that
emphasize woman's equality with man, beginning with Eve's infraction and Adam's subsequent sharing in
the same sin. Woman's equality with man in the fall holds woman responsible with man for sins in the
world. "The Lord Jesus defines the duties of his followers in his Sermon on the Mount. He lays down
grand principles by which they should be governed, without any reference to sex or condition" (Letters,
38). For Sarah, women's empowerment requires their acknowledgment of complicity in the sins of
racism on equal ground with men. Sarah also addresses woman's equal role in Christian community and
marriage in response to 1 Cor. 7, 14; Eph. 5; and 1 Tim. 2.

The Grimke's are well known as the only Southern white women to become leading abolitionists. They
also were advocates for women's rights, and their writings remain pertinent to contemporary feminist
colloquies. Foundational to their leadership for antislavery and feminist reforms was their
commitment to a vital Christian faith. In response to their conversions, the Grimke' sisters developed a
significant ministry through publication and public speaking, all within the context of the Second Great
Awakening. The Grimké sisters’ careful and sometimes provocative biblical interpretation emphasizes a
powerful message for liberation and social change in response to structures of systemic sin and
injustice.

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