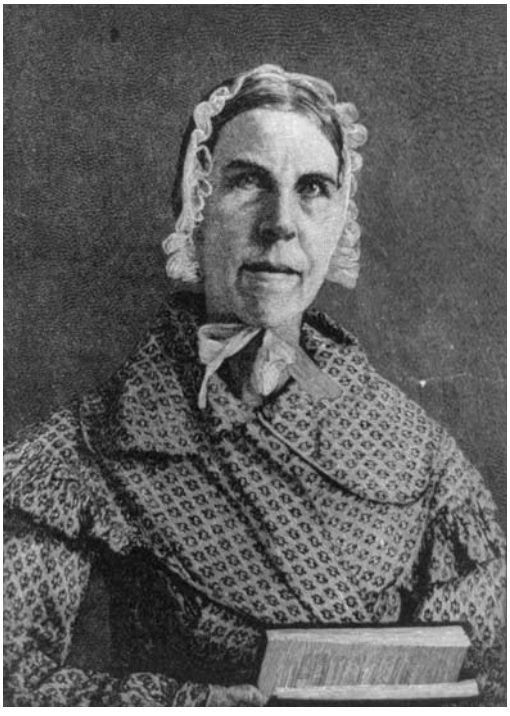


Sarah Grimké

A Useful Member of Society

by Pamela R. Durso

During the early 1830s, many women were active in the abolition movement. They organized separate antislavery societies for women alongside men's organizations, and they focused attention on the female victims of slavery.

One woman instrumental in revolutionizing the role of women in the abolition movement was Sarah Moore Grimké. Sarah and her sister, Angelina, were the first women from a southern slave-owning family to attack slavery publicly, the first women to act as agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the first women in the antislavery movement to address audiences composed of both men and women, and the first women abolitionists to defend the right of women to move outside their traditional role. Together, the Grimké sisters helped change women's activism in the United States.

When the Grimké sisters were at the height of their popularity, Angelina received the majority of attention. She was the better speaker and was married to one of the most prominent abolitionists of the day, Theodore Dwight Weld. Yet a close look at the life of Sarah reveals that her theological insight and commanding style of writing are equally worthy of attention.

Early Life and Education

Sarah was born on November 26, 1792, in Charleston, South Carolina, to a wealthy, slave-owning family. Sarah received a remarkable education. Her older brother, Thomas, recommended books and encouraged her as she studied with him. Their lessons included mathematics, geography, world history, natural science, botany, and Greek.

Sarah also was allowed to participate when her father, a prominent judge, gave legal training to his sons. Judge Grimké engaged his children in debates and coached them in preparing legal arguments. Sarah thrived on these debates and apparently showed more skill than any of her brothers, but when Thomas began serious academic preparation, Sarah's parents objected to her desire to continue studying with him. Even Thomas ridiculed Sarah's desire, and without his approval or help, Sarah's secret dream of becoming a lawyer ended.

The denial of Sarah's dream caused her great frustration. She began to question her purpose in life and mourned the needless waste of her talents. Her despair, however, was not the sole cause of her discontent. From early childhood on, she was deeply disturbed by the treatment of slaves on her father's plantation.

When Sarah was four years old, she stumbled upon a slave woman being whipped severely. Frightened by the scene, Sarah ran from her home down to the wharf. Half an hour later, her nurse found her there begging a sea captain to take her away to a place where such violence did not occur. As she grew, Sarah's dissatisfaction with slavery resulted not only from her disgust over the abuse slaves received, but also from the opportunities that they were denied. She could not understand why slaves were not allowed to learn to read or write. Each Sunday afternoon during her teenage years, Sarah taught Bible classes to the slave children. Though the children were not permitted to read the Bible, they were allowed to hear it read and to have Bible lessons taught to them.

Despite the fact that teaching a slave to read and write was illegal in South Carolina, Sarah secretly gave lessons to a slave girl. Sarah's father eventually found out and threatened the slave girl with a whipping and sternly lectured his daughter on the dangers of her actions. This incident perhaps reminded Sarah that slaves were in the same position as she because they too were denied opportunities to learn.

Conversion to Quakerism

As a young woman, Sarah turned to Quakerism hoping to find peace and security. Soon after she began attending Quaker meetings, she became convinced that she had experienced a divine call to be a minister.

Sarah became increasingly uncomfortable living on a slave plantation and increasingly intent on exploring her call to ministry. At the age of twenty-nine, she left Charleston and moved to Philadelphia. There she faithfully attended the Fourth and Arch Street Quaker meeting and pursued her calling. Yet the thought of speaking before a congregation frightened her. Because Quakers emphasized that all utterances made at their meetings be spontaneous, Sarah could not prepare herself to speak at their meetings. Her uncertainty about her speaking ability and her lack of preparation proved to be disastrous. Sarah's poor speaking performances at the meetings did not impress her fellow Quakers. Many of them criticized her attempts, and the leadership denounced the content and delivery of her speeches, hurting Sarah deeply.

In 1829, Sarah's younger sister, Angelina, moved to Philadelphia. Angelina also concluded that she had been called to be a Quaker minister. Yet, unlike Sarah, Angelina did not quietly accept the restrictions on her activities or her goals. She severed her ties with the Quakers and became involved in the abolition movement — a movement denounced by many Quaker leaders as being too political.

After working together for the abolitionist cause, Theodore Dwight Weld and Angelina Grimké eventually married. Their correspondence reveals their firm desire to live as husband and wife according to their biblical convictions about the equality of men and women.

Initially, Sarah was reluctant to involve herself or to support her sister's participation in an abolition society. Her opposition, however, was short lived. After living in Philadelphia for nine years and struggling to establish herself as a Quaker minister, Sarah was finally ready to concede that her goal was unattainable. Although this was a difficult decision, it turned out to be liberating for Sarah. It not only freed her from the continual criticism and rejection she had encountered; it freed her to look for other avenues to fulfill her call to ministry.

Involvement in the Abolition Movement

In October 1836, the Grimké sisters traveled together to New York and consulted with the American Anti-Slavery Society. They formed a National Female Anti-Slavery Society in November and set out on a tour of New England, speaking to groups of women and distributing tracts.

The Grimkés began meeting in private homes for the purpose of informing and involving women in the cause of abolition. They soon discovered, however, that no parlor in any city that they visited was large enough to hold all the women who wanted to attend. Their popularity most likely can be attributed to their status as former slaveholders, for their descriptions of slavery had an authenticity that could only be surpassed by those of former slaves. To accommodate the crowds, the Grimkés agreed to hold their meetings in churches despite the prejudices against women speaking in public places.

Women speaking in public to other women was shocking enough in the 1830s, but Sarah and Angelina were soon speaking to men as well. On June 21, 1837, in Lynn, Massachusetts, the Grimkés encountered their first "mixed" audience of significant size, when more than one thousand men and women attended.

Speaking before men became a routine occurrence for the sisters. In a letter to abolitionist Gerrit Smith, Sarah summed up the experience: "One brother wanted to come and another thought he had a right and now the door is wide open. Whosoever will come and hear our testimony may come."

The Grimkés' speaking tour lasted approximately six months. They visited sixty-seven New England towns and addressed 40,500 people.

Letters on the Equality of the Sexes

Despite the Grimké sisters' popularity and their contributions to the cause of abolition, their public speeches and the presence of men at these speeches stirred up much controversy. Clergymen, male abolitionists, and even women criticized them. Sarah responded by writing numerous articles, letters, and essays.

In her first major writing, *Letters on the Equality of Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1838), Sarah offered a controversial yet innovative affirmation of the rights of women. Her convictions about the need for full female equality were reflected in what has become the most often quoted passage of her writings:

> I ask no favors for my sex. I surrender not our claim to equality. All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from our necks, and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy.

Sarah began *Letters on the Equality of Women* by declaring that she would demonstrate the scriptural basis of female equality. By employing the Bible to support her arguments, she recognized that she would challenge the traditional and accepted interpretation of biblical texts. Sarah formulated sophisticated exegetical principles to aid her in this task.

For example, she held that an interpretation of Scripture must consider the historical context in which a specific passage was written. Sarah believed that the apostle Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians

and 1 Timothy must be interpreted in light of specific problems being experienced within the first-century churches. Knowledge of the disruptions caused by newly converted women in Corinth and Ephesus, according to Sarah, would enable nineteenth-century readers of the Bible to understand that the command for women to remain silent was not a universal command but one given to counter a specific problem.

Sarah also held that the overarching principles of the Bible must inform the interpretation of particular texts. For Sarah, one such principle was that both man and woman are created in God's own image. Thus, both sexes equally bear the divine image. A second principle, according to Sarah, was perfect human equality. Based on her reading of Galatians 3:28, she concluded that God willed no distinctions among Christians because of gender, social, or racial differences.

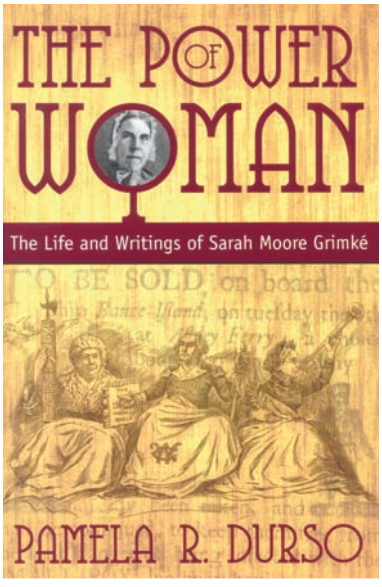
A close reading of her biblical exegesis reveals that Sarah's thinking was far ahead of most of her contemporaries. In fact, the hermeneutical principles set forth by Sarah in the early nineteenth century bear a remarkable resemblance to those offered by twenty-first-century biblical scholars.

Among Sarah's other major assertions were that women had a right to educational, vocational, and legal equality. Most young women in the early nineteenth century received little education beyond the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Girls from wealthy families, like Sarah's, often attended private schools, but these schools focused on correct female behavior rather than on intellectual development. Young women received instruction in needlework, cross stitch, and perhaps beadwork. They were introduced to French, art, and music, but did not receive enough training to master any of them. Sarah called for educational equality for girls and women.

The attainment of equal educational opportunities for women, Sarah believed, would eventually lead to their vocational equality. Such equality meant that women could work alongside men in the occupation of their choice. Sarah emphatically expressed her convictions about the proper role of women by stating, "WHATSOEVER IT IS MORALLY RIGHT FOR A MAN TO DO, IT IS MORALLY RIGHT FOR A WOMAN TO DO."

Sarah believed that the inability of women to gain educational and vocational equality was due to the bias of the legal system of her day. Most women were not allowed to own property or control money. Only when such laws were annulled, Sarah wrote, would women occupy the exalted station that God intended them to hold.

Sarah further concluded that without proper educational opportunities, vocational choices, and legal protection, women could not possibility expect to gain financial independence. The economic oppression women suffered was especially evident in the lives of working women of the lower socioeconomic class. Many of these women had no choice but to work outside the home, yet they received one-half to one-third of the pay given their male counterparts. As a result of continued economic oppression, Sarah argued, most women assumed that they deserved less pay than men.



The Power of Woman

THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF SARAH MOORE GRIMKE (1792–1873)
by Pamela R. Durso

Based on her interpretation of Scripture, Sarah Moore Grimké advocated full equality for women in education, vocation, politics, and finances. She was a role model for many women who later became leaders in the suffrage movement, and is still a role model for many today.

Conclusion

Sarah's contributions as an abolitionist and defender of women's rights are remarkable given her personal background. She was reared on a slave plantation, denied educational and vocational opportunities, and rejected by her church. Yet her writings and reform work were greatly influential.

During the Grimké sisters' 1836–37 tour of New England, Sarah spoke to well over forty thousand people. Her presence on a public platform alone caused many people to question their attitudes about women's roles and rights. The wide circulation of *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* influenced many women and men of her day, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Abby Kelly, Lucy Stone, and Susan B. Anthony. Because of her influence, Sarah was listed as one of the eighteen women to whom Stanton, Anthony, and Matilda Gage dedicated their pioneering account of the woman suffrage movement, *History of Woman Suffrage*.

Sarah's activities and her writings continue to have significance for twenty-first-century Christians. Although her work may not have directly influenced either feminist or evangelical interpretations of Scripture, almost two hundred years ago she anticipated much of what is now being thought and written.

The importance of Sarah's writings, and especially her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes,* for present day biblical, sociological, and political studies is confirmed by the fact that the collection was reprinted twice in the late twentieth century (1988 and 1989). Moreover, in 1998, many of Sarah's letters and several of her manuscripts were published for the first time in Gerda Lerner's book, *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké.*

The lifelong goal of Sarah Grimké was to become a useful member of society. She struggled continually to meet that goal and was often restricted and even denied in her attempts. Yet, through her achievements both as an activist and a writer, Sarah fulfilled her goal. The continuing significance of her life and her writings further establishes that she did indeed become a useful member of society.

Pamela R. Durso is Associate Executive Director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society in Brentwood, Tennessee.