

**Sarah Grimke**  
(1792 - 1873) and  
**Angelina Grimke Weld**  
(1805 - 1879)

**Letters on the Equality of the Sexes**  
1838

**Letters to Catherine e. Beecher**  
1837

The Grimke sisters of South Carolina were two early female abolitionists and women's rights activists, traveling throughout the North, lecturing about their first-hand experiences with slavery on their family plantation. Receiving abuse and ridicule for their abolitionist activity, as later women active in a range of reform activities would find, they both realized that women would have to create a safe space in the public arena if they wanted to be effective abolitionists and reformers. So in an often to be repeated story, they both became women's rights activists.

Sarah Grimke was an abolitionist from an early age: she saw a slave being whipped at age 5 and tried to board a steamer to live in a place where there is no slavery. Later in opposition to southern law, she taught her attendant to read. An early feminist, she wanted to become an attorney and follow in her father's footsteps. He was chief judge of the Supreme Court of South Carolina. She studied constantly until her parents found out that she intended to go to college with her brother - then they forbid her to study her brother's books or any language. Her father supposedly remarked that if "she [Sarah] had not been a woman she would have made the greatest jurist in the land."

Her father, a strong advocate of slavery and of the subordination of women, was a wealthy planter with hundreds of slaves. He fathered at least 14 children. Sarah was the sixth child and Angelina was the youngest. When she was forbidden from studying, Sarah begged her parents to allow her to become Angelina's godmother and she became part mother and part sister to her much younger sibling.

At age 26, Sarah took her father to Philadelphia for medical care where she became acquainted with the Quaker movement. After he died, she returned to Charleston in 1818. Three years later she moved back to Philadelphia to be with her Quaker friends. Sarah visited Charleston for the final time in 1827 when she converted Angelina to the Quaker faith. Angelina joined her in 1829.

In 1829 Angelina wrote a letter to the editor of William Lloyd Garrison's paper which he published without her knowledge. Immediately they were both rebuked by the Quaker community and sought out by the abolitionist movement. The sisters had to choose: recant and become members in good -standing in the Quaker community again or reaffirm the letter and actively work to oppose slavery. They choose the latter course.

Alice Rossi says that this choice "seemed to free both sisters for a rapidly escalating awareness of the many restrictions upon their lives. Their physical and intellectual energies were soon fully expanded, as though they and their ideas had been suddenly released after a long period of germination." Theodore Weld trained them to be abolition speakers. Contact with like-minded individuals for the first time in their lives enlivened the sisters.

Sarah was rebuked again in 1836 by Quakers when she tried to discuss abolition in a meeting. They began speaking in private homes to members of the abolition movement about the horrors of slavery. Eventually at the behest of the abolitionist movement, they began to speak publicly about their personal experiences and knowledge of slavery. They were among the first women to speak publicly in the US and, given the controversial nature of their subject, they drew intense criticism.

As would happen time and time again, women began by fighting for the rights of others and ended up fighting for their own rights. They were attacked because they were women seeking to operate in the public sphere. They came to understand that women were oppressed and without power and that without power women could not right the wrongs of society. Such an understanding made these women into ardent feminists.

Angelina wrote her first tract, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836), to encourage southern women to join the abolitionist movement for the sake of white womanhood as well as black slaves. To her mind, slavery harmed white womanhood by destroying the institution of marriage. Marriage was destroyed when white men fathered their slaves' children and evidence of that fact could be seen on the faces of their slaves. To publicly discuss such a delicate subject caused an uproar. The sisters stirred up even more controversy when Sarah published *Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States* (1836) and Angelina again published (*Appeal to the Women of the Nominally Free States* 1837). In 1837 they went on a tour of Congregationalist churches in the north east. In addition to denouncing slavery, an acceptable practice in radical circles, the sisters denounced race prejudice. Further, they argued that (white) women had a natural bond with female, black slaves. These last two ideas were extreme even for radical abolitionists. Their public speaking for the abolitionist cause continued to draw criticism, each attack making the Grimke sisters even more ardently feminist. Responding to an attack by Catherine Beecher on her public speaking, Angelina wrote a series of letters to Beecher, later published with the title *Letters to Catherine Beecher*, staunchly defending the abolitionist cause and also defending her right to publicly speak for the abolitionist cause. By the end of the year they were being denounced from Congregationalist pulpits. The following year Sarah, responding to the minister's attacks, again entered the epistolary fray by writing a series of letters addressed to the President of the abolitionist society which sponsored their speeches, which became known as *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, in which she defended women's right to the public platform .

By 1838, thousands of people flocked to hear their Boston lecture series. Finally, in 1838, Angelina married the great feminist and abolitionist Theodore Weld. Initially both Weld's planned for Angelina to remain active in the abolitionist movement. But the time

demands of running a home and being a wife and mother, forced Angelina to retire from public life. Sarah moved in with her sister and also retired from public life. Although they were no longer publicly active, they remained privately active, committed abolitionists and feminists. In 1839 the sisters edited *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, a collection of newspaper stories from southern papers written by southern newspaper editors. Angelina bore three children, in 1839, 1841, and 1844. Thereafter, she suffered from some disorder of the reproductive tract. Until 1844, Theodore was often away from home, either on the lecture circuit or in Washington. After that, financial pressures forced him to take up a more lucrative profession.

For a time they lived on a farm and operated a boarding school. Many abolitionists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, sent their children to the school. Eventually, it grew to become a cooperative community, Raritan Bay Union. After the war, the sisters took in two mulatto children who turned out to be their nephews and who both used the Grimke name. The wife of one, Charlotte Forten Grimke, became a noted educator and author. The daughter of one, Angelina Weld Grimke, (Angelina Grimke Weld's namesake) became a noted poet. When Sarah was nearly 80, to test the fifteenth amendment, the sisters attempted to vote. These two remarkable, dynamic feminist foremothers lead rich and full lives.

Neither Sarah nor Angelina sought to become feminists. Rather the role was forced onto them. Both Sarah, who eventually emphasized feminism over abolitionism, and Angelina, who remained primarily interested in the abolitionist movement, were powerful writers. They neatly summarized the abolitionist arguments which would eventually lead to the civil war. Sarah's work deserves much greater recognition than it has received. Many of the issues which the modern feminist movement is currently addressing, she addressed over 150 years ago. Devoutly religious, these Quaker converts' works are predominantly religious in nature with strong biblical arguments. Indeed, both their abolitionist sentiments and their feminism sprang from deeply held religious convictions. Their works should be of interest to all feminist Christian theologians.

Although Angelina's letter was published before Sarah's, by Angelina's own words, by a comparison of the texts, and by analyzing these works as part of a larger body of works, it is clear that much of Angelina's analysis of the creation story comes from Sarah. Although the two sisters shared the same interpretation of the creation story, their discussions of it are very different. Angelina uses her interpretation of the creation story to bolster her position that women were not created as a gift for or possession of men but rather as unique, intelligent, capable, creatures deserving of the regard, rights, and responsibilities as men. Sarah's discussion of the creation story is much longer, more detailed, and more sophisticated. Both stories emphasize the equality of men and women's creation but Sarah goes on to discuss Adam's greater responsibility for the fall. To her, Eve, innocent of the ways of evil, was tempted by the crafty serpent while Adam was tempted by a mere mortal. Because of the supernatural nature of her tempter, Eve's sinfulness can be more easily forgiven. Further, Adam should have tenderly reproved his wife and lead them both away from sin. Hence, Adam failed in two ways, not one. By analyzing the Hebrew text and by comparing the phrasing used here with the phrasing

used in the story of Cain and Abel, Sarah found that God's "curse" is not a curse but a prophecy. She concludes with the thought that women are bound to God alone.

First, from Angelina Grimke's *Letter XII Human Rights Not Founded on Sex*, October 2, 1837, pp 194 - 198

"The regulation of duty by the mere circumstance of sex, rather than by the fundamental principle of moral being, has led to all that multifarious train of evils flowing out of the anti-christian doctrine of masculine and feminine virtues. By this doctrine, man had been converted into the warrior, and clothed with sternness, and those other kindred qualities, which in common estimation belong to his character as a man; whilst woman has been taught to lean upon an arm of flesh, to sit as a doll arrayed in "gold, and pearls, and costly array," to be admired for her personal charms, and caressed and humored like a spoiled child, or converted into a mere drudge to suit the convenience of her lord and master. Thus have all the diversified relations of life been filled with "confusion and every evil work." This principle has given to man a charter for the exercise of tyranny and selfishness, pride and arrogance, lust and brutal violence. It has robbed woman of essential rights, the right to think and speak and act on all great moral questions, just as men think and speak and act; the right to share their responsibilities, perils and toils; the right to fulfill the great end of her being, as a moral, intellectual and immortal creature, and of glorifying god in her body and her spirit which are His. Hitherto, instead of being a help meet to man, in the highest, noblest sense of the term as a companion, a co-worker, an equal; she has been a mere appendage of his being, an instrument of his convenience and pleasure, the pretty toy with which he wiled away his leisure moments, or the pet animal whom he humored into playfulness and submission. Woman, instead of being regarded as the equal of man, has uniformly been looked down upon as his inferior, a mere gift to fill up the measure of his happiness. In "the poetry of romantic gallantry," it is true, she has been called "the last best gift of God to man"; but I believe I speak forth the words of truth and soberness when I affirm, that woman never was given to man. She was created, like him, in the image of God, and crowned with glory and honor; created only a little lower than the angels, - not, as is almost universally assumed, a little lower than man; on her brow, as well as on his, was placed the "diadem of beauty," and in her hand the scepter of universal dominion. Gen 1: 27, 28. "The last *best gift* of God to man"! Where is the scripture warrant for this "rhetorical flourish, this splendid absurdity?" Let us examine the account of the creation. "And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man." Not as a gift - for Adam immediately recognized her *as part of himself* - ("this is now bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh") - a companion and equal, not one hair's breadth beneath him in the majesty and glory of her moral being; not placed under his authority as a *subject*, but by his side, on the same platform of human rights, under the government of God only. This idea of woman's being "the last gift of God to man," however pretty it may sound to the ears of those who love to discourse upon. " The poetry of romantic gallantry, and the generous promptings of chivalry," has nevertheless

been the means of sinking her from an end into a mere *means* - of turning her into an *appendage* to man, instead of recognizing her as a part of man - of destroying her individuality, and rights, and responsibilities, and merging her moral being in that of man. Instead of *Jehovah* being *her* king, *her* lawgiver, *her* judge, she has been taken out of the exalted scale of existence in which He placed her, and subjected to the despotic control of man." pp 195 - 196

As an added bonus, Angelina also wrote: ". . . whatever is *morally* right for a man to do, it is *morally* right for a woman to do. I recognize no rights but *human* rights - I know nothing of men's rights and women's rights; for in Christ Jesus, there is neither male nor female.

. . . I prize the purity of *his* character as highly as I do that of hers. As a moral being, *whatever it is morally wrong for her to do, it is morally wrong for him to do.*" pp 196 - 197

From Sarah Grimke's *Letter 1: The Original Equality of Woman* July 11, 1837

Sarah precedes the following quote with the comment that all translations are corrupt and the only inspired versions of the Bible are in the original languages.

"We must first view woman at the period of her creation. "And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them." In all this sublime description of the creation of man, (which is a difference intimated as existing between them. They were both made in the image of God; dominion was given to both over every other creature, but not over each other. Created in perfect equality, they were expected to exercise the viceregency intrusted to them by their Maker, in harmony and love.

Let us pass on now to the recapitulation of the creation of man: - "The Lord god formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God said, it is not good that man should be alone, I will make him an help meet for him." All creation swarmed with animated beings capable of natural affection, as we know they still are; it was not, therefore, merely to give man a creature susceptible of loving, obeying, and looking up to him, for all that the animals could do and did do. It was to give him a companion, *in all respects* his equal; one who was like himself a *free agent*, gifted with intellect and endowed with immortality; not a partaker merely of his animal gratifications, but able to enter into all his feelings as a moral and responsible being. If this had not been the case, how could she have been a help meet for him? I understand this as applying not only to the parties entering into the marriage contract, but to all men and women, because I believe God designed woman to be a help meet for man in every good and perfect work. She was part of himself, as if Jehovah designed to make the oneness and identity of

man and woman perfect and complete; and when the glorious work of their creation was finished, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy."

This blissful condition was not long enjoyed by our first parents. Eve, it would seem from history, was wandering alone amid the bowers of Paradise, when the serpent met with her. From her reply to Satan, it is evident that the command not to eat "of the tree that is in the midst of the garden," was given to both, although the term man was used when the prohibition was issued by God. "And the woman said unto the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall Ye touch it, lest Ye die." Here the woman was exposed to temptation from a being with whom she was unacquainted. She had been accustomed to associate with her beloved partner, and to hold communion with God and with angels; but of satanic intelligence, she was in all probability entirely ignorant. Through the subtlety of the serpent, she was beguiled. And "when she was that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof and did eat."

We next find Adam involved in the same sin, not through the instrumentality of a super-natural agent, but through that of his equal, a being whom he must have known was liable to transgress the divine command, because he must have felt that he was himself a free agent, and that he was restrained from disobedience only by the exercise of faith and love towards his Creator. Had Adam tenderly reproved his wife, and endeavored to lead her to repentance instead of sharing in her guilt, I should be much more ready to accord to man that superiority which he claims; but as the facts stand disclosed by the sacred historian, it appears to men that to say the least, there was as much weakness exhibited by Adam as by Eve. They both fell from innocence, and consequently from happiness, but not from equality.

Let us next examine the conduct of this fallen pair, when Jehovah interrogated them respecting their fault. They both frankly confessed their guilt. "The man said, the woman who thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat. And the woman said, the serpent beguiled me and I did eat." And the Lord God said unto the woman, "Thou wilt be subject unto thy husband, and he will rule over thee." That this did not allude to the subjection of woman to man is manifest, because the same mode of expression is used in speaking to Cain of Abel. The truth is that the curse, as it is termed, which was pronounced by Jehovah upon woman, is a simple prophecy. The Hebrew, like the French language, uses the same word to express shall and will. Our translators having been accustomed to exercise their lordship over their wives, and seeing only through the medium of a perverted judgment, very naturally, though I think not very learnedly or very kindly, translated it shall instead of will, and thus converted a prediction to Eve into a command to Adam; for observe, it is addressed to the woman and not to the man. the consequence of the fall was an

immediate struggle for dominion, and Jehovah foretold which would gain the ascendancy; but as he created them in his image, as that image manifestly was not lost by the fall, because it is urged in Gen 9:6, as an argument why the life of man should not be taken by his fellow man, there is no reason to suppose that sin produced any distinction between them as moral, intellectual, and responsible beings. Man might just as well have endeavored by hard labor to fulfill the prophecy, thorns and thistles will the earth bring forth to thee, as to pretend to accomplish the other, "he will rule over thee," by asserting dominion over his wife.

Authority usurped from God, not give.  
He gave him only over beast, flesh, fowl,  
Dominion absolute: that right he holds  
By God's donation: but man o'er woman  
He made not Lord, such title to himself  
Reserving, human left from human free,

Here then I plant myself. God created us equal; - he created us free agents; - he is our Lawgiver, our King, and our Judge, and to him alone is woman bound to be in subjection, and to him alone is she accountable for the use of those talents with which Her Heavenly Father has entrusted her. One is her Master even Christ." pages 205 - 207

#### References:

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