Sarah Grimké as Biblical Commentator

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Abstract

Mark Noll recognized that "the most comprehensive defense of female activity in public life came from Sarah Grimké." Claudia Setzer lauded Grimké's *Letters*, as "the first sustained analysis of women's rights stemming from biblical and theological argument to be written by an American." Scholars have studied her use of the Bible, including her critique of translations, but none has detailed Grimké's use of the influential whole-volume commentaries of Matthew Henry, Thomas Scott, and Adam Clarke. This article documents her citations, critiques, and editing of those commentaries through selection, interruption, omission, and paraphrase. It focuses upon her thirteenth and fourteenth letters, in which Grimké interpreted Acts 2:1–4, 1 Cor 11:4–5 and 14:34–35, and 1 Tim 2:8–12. By studying her critical engagement with commentaries, we demonstrate the veracity of Grimké's contention that women "shall produce some various readings of the Bible a little different from those we now have."

Keywords

women's rights, Sarah Grimké, Bible, commentaries, hermeneutics, early American Republic, Adam Clarke, Matthew Henry

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Introduction

Sarah Grimké's *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* first appeared seriatim in 1837 in the *New England Spectator* and William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*; the letters were published as a book a year later.[1] "Observers at the time," notes Mark Noll, "recognized that the most comprehensive defense of female activity in public life came from Sarah Grimké."[2] Gerda Lerner considers the book "the first comprehensive feminist argument presented by an American woman, ten years before the Seneca Falls convention."[3] Elizabeth Ann Bartlett deems it the "first book-length philosophical statement by an American Woman on 'the woman question.'"[4] And Claudia Setzer lauds it as "the first sustained analysis of women's rights stemming from biblical and theological argument to be written by an American."[5]

Sarah Grimké (1792–1873) penned most of these letters after the Council of Congregationalist Ministers of Massachusetts's Pastoral Letter of June 1837 indirectly censured her and her sister, Angelina. The impetus for the ministers' objection was the sisters' speaking in public to mixed (i.e., male and female) audiences on the abolitionist circuit.[6] While the Pastoral Letter did not mention names, the implication was clear: "The appropriate duties and influence of women

[1] Angelina Grimké explained the background to her sister's letters: "We received a note from Mary Parker telling us that Wm. S. Porter had requested her to try to obtain some one to write for his paper [*New England Spectator*] in order that it might be better sustained. She asked him whether *she* might choose the subject and named the *province of woman:* he said yes, he would be glad to have such pieces to publish. Just at this time the Pastoral Letter came out, and Mary requested us to write something every week about *Woman* for the Spectator. These letters have not been the means of *arousing* the public attention to the subject of Womans rights, it was the Pastoral Letter which did the mischief" (*Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822–1844* [ed. Gilbert Hobbs Barnes and Dwight Lowell Dumond; 2 vols.; New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1934] 1:427–28).

[2] Mark A. Noll, *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022) 390.

[3] Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (rev. and exp. ed.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 134.

[4] Elizabeth Ann Bartlett's introduction to Sarah Grimké, *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and Other Essays* (ed. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 1–29, at 1.

[5] Claudia Setzer, "Slavery, Women's Rights, and the Beginnings of Feminist Biblical Interpretation in the Nineteenth Century," *Postscripts* 5 (2009) 145–69, at 147.

[6] The ministers' letter "effectively barred the sisters from conducting meetings in churches" (David L. Wallace, *Compelled to Write: Alternative Rhetoric in Theory and Practice* [Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011] 47). For background on the Pastoral Letter, see Bartlett, introduction, 2–4; Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, "American Women and the Bible: The Nature of Woman as a Hermeneutical Issue," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Adela Yarbro Collins; BSNA 10; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 11–33, at 14–15, 17–19; and Lerner, *Grimké Sisters*, 131–32. Catherine Brekus demonstrates that backlash against the Grimké sisters and other female reformers turned the public against female preachers as well. See Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 278–82.

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are clearly stated in the New Testament. Those duties are unobtrusive and private, but the sources of mighty power."[7]

In letter three, Grimké responded to the Pastoral Letter directly. She disclosed that "no one can desire more earnestly than I do, that woman may move exactly in the sphere which her Creator has assigned her." Still, she remonstrated, "The New Testament has been referred to, and I am willing to abide by its decisions, but must enter my protest against the false translation of some passages by the MEN who did that work, and against the perverted interpretation by the MEN who undertook to write commentaries thereon. I am inclined to think, when we are admitted to the honor of studying Greek and Hebrew, we shall produce some various readings of the Bible a little different from those we now have."[8]

Contemporary interpreters of Grimké's *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* acknowledge her assiduous use of the Bible. Elizabeth Ann Bartlett, Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, Nancy Hardesty, David Hempton, Gerda Lerner, Mark Noll, Anna Speicher and Laceye Warner discuss her hermeneutical strategies, including her critique of the King James Version.[9] Yet only two scholars take into consideration her engagement with commentaries. Claudia Setzer mentions her use of commentaries when she cites Grimké's wholesale adoption of Adam Clarke's anti-Jewish rhetoric with respect to 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12.[10] Pamela Durso's discussion is more thorough, though she omits Thomas Scott, whose commentary Grimké cited. Durso, further, is not entirely accurate vis-à-vis Grimké's use of Matthew Henry's

[7] General Association of Massachusetts, "Pastoral Letter," in *American Rhetorical Discourse* (ed. Ronald F. Reid; 2nd ed.; Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1995) 363–67, https://users.wfu.edu/zulick/340/pastoralletter.html.

[8] Grimké, *Letters*, 38. Quotations of Sarah Grimké are from *Letters* (ed. Bartlett).

Similar statements about men's "false translation" and "perverted interpretation" were codified a decade later in the Declaration of Sentiments approved at the first woman's rights convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848: "*Resolved*. That woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of the Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her" ("Declaration of Sentiments," *National Park Service*, 7 February 2023, https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm).

[9] This study analyzes Grimké's use of *commentaries* on the Bible. For her use of the Bible in general, see Bartlett, introduction, 20–22; Gifford, "American Women," 15–20; Nancy A. Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Revivalism and Feminism in the Age of Finney* (Chicago Studies in the History of American Religion; Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991) 64–65, 69; David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 96–98; Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (vol. 2 of *Women and History*; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 159–63; eadem, *Grimké Sisters*, 134–38; Noll, *America's Book*, 384–85, 388, 390–91, 394–96; Anna M. Speicher, *The Religious World of Antislavery Women: Spirituality in the Lives of Five Abolitionist Lecturers* (Women and Gender in Religion; Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000) 112–16; Laceye Warner, "Grimké, Sarah (1792–1873), and Angelina Grimké Weld (1805–79)," in *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (ed. Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 218–21; and eadem, *Saving Women: Retrieving Evangelistic Theology and Practice* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007) 91–99.

[10] Setzer, "Slavery, Women's Rights," 161.

commentary. Durso traces Grimké's discussion of woman's subordination directly to Henry's interpretation of Gen 3:16, but this view was hardly his alone.[11] Without explicit citations or verbatim wording from Henry's commentary, which Durso does not supply, biblical support for woman's subordination can be traced to other commentators as well. Durso also claims that Henry's interpretation of Ps 8:5–6 "placed women on the same level as animals, that is, women were created solely to help and to comfort men."[12] This is not quite correct. As we shall demonstrate, Grimké misinterpreted Henry, who placed woman between man (as male) and animals. Setzer's mention is brief and Durso's neither complete nor entirely accurate, but both indicate Grimké's reliance upon commentaries.

This study examines Sarah Grimké as a biblical commentator in light of her in-depth engagement with the most influential commentaries of her day. We shall document her adoption of explicit citations from those commentaries, her critique of them, and her editing by way of selection, interruption, omission, and paraphrase. We will limit our analysis principally to her thirteenth and fourteenth letters, in which Grimké interpreted Acts 2:1–4 (the story of Pentecost), 1 Cor 11 and 14 (in particular, the tension in Paul's letters between women's prophesying [1 Cor 11:4–5] and his injunction for women to be silent in church assemblies and to ask questions at home [1 Cor 14:34–35]), and 1 Tim 2:8–12 (in which Paul—she assumed Pauline authorship of the Pastoral letters—told Timothy that he did not allow women to teach).

Cracking the vexing conundrum of Paul's mandates for women to be silent proved an urgent matter for women who championed their right to speak in public during the early American republic. In 1820, Deborah Peirce, after a review of Old Testament women, introduced an imaginary interlocutor, who countered: "But, says one, all this avails you nothing, since Paul hath declared it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church."[13] In 1824, Harriet Livermore noted, "the strength of opposers to female preaching lies in a charge Paul gives respecting the women at Corinth, and his directions to Timothy."[14] In 1842, Rebecca Miller, like Peirce, addressed an interlocutor: "But, says the objector, there is a total prohibition of their public officiation in the new dispensation, made by the apostle Paul."[15] These rejoinders underscore that Pauline passages silencing women were a biblical juggernaut. Sarah Grimké would need to undermine these mandates as well if she were to demonstrate the equality of the sexes.

[11] Pamela R. Durso, *The Power of Woman: The Life and Writings of Sarah Moore Grimké* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003) 136.

[12] Ibid., 144.

[13] Deborah Peirce, *A Scriptural Vindication of Female Preaching, Prophesying, or Exhortation* (Carmel, NY: E. Burroughs, 1820) 12.

[14] Harriet Livermore, *Scriptural Evidence in Favour of Female Testimony in Meetings for Christian Worship; In Letters to a Friend* (Portsmouth, NH: R. Foster, 1824) 91.

[15] Rebecca Miller, "Duty of Females," *Christian Palladium* 10.2 (May 15, 1841) 21.

It will become apparent, in the course of this study, that Grimké did undermine Paul's mandates through a thoroughgoing interaction with the most influential commentaries of her day. She appropriated, explicitly or not, verbatim or through paraphrase, her predecessors' interpretations, even as she railed "against the perverted interpretation by the MEN who undertook to write commentaries." Yet she departed from them, too, as we will document. To acknowledge that her *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* evinced a serious and sustained engagement with commentaries is to comprehend not just the full scope of her hermeneutical approach to the Bible but also Sarah Grimké's place in history as the first female American biblical commentator.

Sarah Grimké's Use of Commentaries

Grimké was not the first American woman to cite commentaries. Harriet Livermore, in *Scriptural Evidence in Favour of Female Testimony*, had included two references to Augustin Calmet's *Dictionary of the Holy Bible,*[16] which she consulted for background information on Euodias, Syntyche, and Phoebe.[17] Though not a commentary, the dictionary was a literary source for Livermore. Nancy Towle, in her 1833 autobiography, had cited, without comment, a paragraph from Clarke's commentary on Rom 16:12 about women prophets, including Tryphena and Tryphosa.[18] However, neither Livermore's use of Calmet nor Towle's of Clarke suggest any sort of serious engagement with commentators.

In her discussion of key New Testament texts on women in her thirteenth and fourteenth letters, Grimké quoted from a wide range of literary sources, including ones written by John Milton, John Locke, Thomas Stratten (spelled Stratton by Grimké), Anthony Blackwall, and John Newton.[19] The commentators to whom she made reference included Welsh-born, English-educated Matthew Henry (1662–1714), English author Thomas Scott (1747–1821), and Anglo-Irish Methodist commentator Adam Clarke (1762–1832). Alongside the commentaries of Henry, Scott, and Clarke, we will include British Quaker Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847), whose eighth chapter of *Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends* functions for Grimké as a commentary on Pauline texts.[20]

[16] Antoine Augustin Calmet, *An Historical, Critical, Geographical, Chronological, and Etymological Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (trans. Samuel D'Oyly and John Colson; 3 vols.; London: J. J. and P. Knapton, 1732). This dictionary appeared in various editions with varying numbers of volumes.

[17] Livermore, *Scriptural Evidence*, 95, 97.

[18] Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated: In the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* (Portsmouth, NH: Caldwell, 1833) 13.

[19] It is important to identify these as literary sources because other authors, such as Elizabeth Wilson, would respond to oral sources. For instance, the ninth chapter in her book was her response to a lecture (Elizabeth Wilson, *A Scriptural View of Woman's Rights and Duties, in All the Important Relations of Life* [Philadelphia: Wm. S. Young, 1849] 223–52.)

[20] According to Lerner, the "only source of current information the Grimké sisters read while in Philadelphia was *The Friend*, a weekly Quaker newspaper in which Gurney published a regular column, titled 'Biblical Notes'" (Lerner, *Grimké Sisters*, 65).

The environment for the flourishing of biblical commentary in the early nineteenth century, as Seth Perry and Mark Noll have documented, was characterized by the prodigious emergence of a religious publishing industry, including the founding of the American Bible Society in 1816.[21] Bibles were published at a rapid rate, often with parabiblical materials, such as timelines, concordances, and various indexes, allowing readers to study the Bible without reading sequentially.[22] While not at the same pace as the Bible itself, extra-biblical dictionaries and commentaries too proliferated. Several leading interpreters came to be so closely associated with their works that they were identified eponymously. According to Perry, Margaret Hills's bibliography of American Bibles identifies over forty commentators and editors whose names were associated with at least one American edition of the Bible published through 1840. Charles Buck's *Theological Dictionary*, for example, which sold 50,000 copies by the early 1830s, came to be known eponymously as *Buck's Theological Dictionary*.[23] "The names of the best-known bible scholars," notes Perry, "appeared prominently on the title pages of their various works and became the common way of referring to them: 'Brown's Bible,' 'Scott's Bible,' and 'Clarke's Bible,'" the last two of which Sarah Grimké consulted and criticized.[24]

Commentators met with renown in such a biblically-congenial environment. For example, by the time the first edition of Scott's commentary appeared in America in 1804, his autobiography had already gone through at least three American editions, beginning seven years prior to the American Revolution; by 1856, his autobiography went through more than thirty American editions. Scott's commentary, published in parts between 1804 and 1809, appeared in a less expensive abridgement as early as 1812 in New York.[25] Perry observes how "William J. Gilmore's analysis of probate records from rural New Hampshire and Vermont between 1787 and 1830 found twenty-seven sets of Scott's bible, about eight percent of all bibles recorded, a substantial proportion for a large book in a rural area."[26]

Other commentators enjoyed equal renown. Matthew Henry "had a gift for memorable phrases, and his commentary won great popularity," which extended well beyond its publication in the eighteenth century.[27] Another pivotal resource for Grimké was Adam Clarke, whose widespread reputation and scholarly renown led to his election three times as president of British Methodism. Clarke's commentary,

[21] Noll, *America's Book*, 130–54; Seth Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018) 20, 37, 41.

[22] Perry, *Bible Culture*, 34.

[23] Matthew Bowman and Samuel Brown, "Reverend Buck's Theological Dictionary and the Struggle to Define American Evangelicalism, 1802–1851" *Journal of the Early Republic* (2009) 442.

[24] Perry, *Bible Culture*, 49. For a description of Brown's Bible, see ibid., 26, 28.

[25] Ibid., 49, 51.

[26] Ibid., 51.

[27] John H. Hayes, *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (2 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) 1:495.

which "exerted enormous influence on nineteenth-century biblical scholarship, was frequently reprinted, and remains in print today."[28]

The formidable influence these commentators exerted can be distilled further from the writings of women's rights activist Elizabeth Wilson, whose *A Scriptural View of Woman's Rights and Duties, in All the Important Relations of Life* appeared in 1849. Time and again throughout her book, Wilson claimed that "our popular commentators are the standards of public opinion on woman's position in the human family."[29] They present, she asserted, "*not antiquated views* of woman's standing; but the views *now entertained,* on woman's position in the human family, and the views given from the rostrum, and forum; from the pulpit, and from the press, with few exceptions."[30] In other words, the influence of commentators, such as Henry, Scott, and Clarke, encompassed the podium, the pulpit, and the press. Such was the influence of the commentaries to which Grimké appealed repeatedly in support of the equality of the sexes.

When Grimké engaged these commentaries, she consulted, cited, and criticized the most influential biblical interpreters of her day. She mustered evidence from men whose names were identified with the Bibles upon which they commented (Scott's Bible and Clarke's Bible, etc.). Her decision to engage the likes of Henry, Scott, and Clarke rendered her not merely a commenter on scripture but a commentator herself. But something more can be said about Grimké as a reader of commentaries. Beginning in 1834, excerpts of several commentaries became available in a more amenable five-volume comprehensive commentary.[31] Grimké's quotations suggest that she used the individual commentaries themselves rather than this compilation. For example, her quotation of Scott, in which he refers to "Corinthian teachers" who were inclined "to excite contention" occurs in Scott's commentary on 1 Cor 11:2–16 but not the *Comprehensive Commentary* (or the 1812 abbreviated edition).[32] This observation is significant, given that the format of individual commentaries was "daunting in its density and, one may say, in its capacity to induce desperate boredom."[33] Perry asks, in light of "the distracting complexity of these volumes," how anyone "other than an uncommonly gifted—or at least uncommonly patient—reader might make use of them."[34] Grimké, who consulted these individual commentaries in-depth, proved herself to be one of those rare readers.

[28] Ibid., 1:199.

[29] Wilson, *Scriptural View of Woman's Rights,* 223. See also 19, 167, 194, 200, 223.

[30] Ibid., 371.

[31] *The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible* [ed. William Jenks; 5 vols.; Brattleboro, VT: Fessenden and Co., 1834–1838]. On other such compendia, see Perry, *Bible Culture*, 51.

[32] Grimké, *Letters*, 91. Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with Original Notes, Practical Observations and Copious References* (6 vols.; New York: Whiting and Watson, 1810–1812). Paul's letters are included in volume 6, but Scott's commentary does not have pagination.

[33] Perry, *Bible Culture*, 49.

[34] Ibid., 50.

Sarah Grimké's Hermeneutical Assumptions

Grimké did not, of course, come to the biblical text or literary sources without assumptions, four of which proved pivotal to her effort to demonstrate the validity of her perspective on women in ministry. The first was the inspiration of scripture. Grimké can be counted among "most (but not quite all) of the antebellum women who spoke out on such subjects continued to affirm the Bible's full inspiration."[35] Still, this belief in the inspiration of scripture did not lead her to an uncritical view of scripture's authors. She was prepared to admit, citing 2 Pet 3:16, that Paul's letters could be of "doubtful interpretation" and "hard to be understood."[36] More essential to her argument was her realization that Paul, though inspired, could be riddled by prejudice: "I do not conceive that I derogate in the least from his character as an inspired apostle, to suppose that he may have been imbued with the prevalent prejudices against women."[37]

Another assumption Grimké brought to her study was the conviction that a biblical text had to be consistent with other biblical texts. "According to the generally received meaning of the passages I have quoted," she explained at the conclusion to her thirteenth letter, "they directly contravene the laws of God, as given in various parts of the Bible. Now I must understand the sacred Scriptures as harmonizing with themselves, or I cannot receive them as the word of God."[38] For this reason, at least in part, she devoted her energy to finding a way in which Paul's injunctions to silence in 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12 could harmonize with the reality of women who prophesied in 1 Cor 11.

She delineated a third assumption toward the beginning of her fourteenth letter: "Whatever is *morally* right for a man to do," she claimed, "is *morally* right for a woman to do," including preaching "the unsearchable riches of Christ," which is

[35] Noll, *America's Book*, 383.

[36] Grimké, *Letters*, 93.

[37] Ibid., 81. For several reasons, it is unlikely that Grimké's willingness to pose serious questions about the letters of Paul arose from her acceptance of higher criticism. First, the American epicenter of higher criticism—a product of German scholarship—was located at Harvard and Andover. During the antebellum era, its influence did not spread far beyond the Boston area; the Grimké sisters, before the *Letters* were published in 1837, lived no farther north than Philadelphia. Second, the emergence of higher criticism by American scholars occurred, in general, later than 1837, when Grimké's *Letters* were published. One of its major early proponents, Moses Stuart, published a translation of Ernesti's hermeneutics under the title *Elements of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* in 1827, but much of his work was published later than 1837. Third, and no less telling, Grimké readily cited many authors, including commentators Henry, Scott, and Clarke, but not the works of scholars associated with higher criticism. Her *Letters* contain no explicit evidence of such influence. On the development of biblical criticism in America, see Thomas H. Olbricht, "Biblical Interpretation in North America through the Nineteenth Century," in *The Enlightenment Through the Nineteenth Century* (ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane Watson; vol. 3 of *A History of Biblical Interpretation*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017) 342–86; Jerry W. Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800–1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969).

[38] Grimké, *Letters*, 84.

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the duty of man, yes, but "also of woman."[39] Grimké had set out this principle in her first letter while discussing Gen 1:26–27. This biblical text provided an essential foundation for her belief in the intellectual and moral parity of man and woman.

> In all this sublime description of the creation of man, (which is a generic term including man and woman), there is not one particle of 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 vicegerence and intrusted to them by their Maker, in harmony and love.[40]

Finally, Grimké claimed the right to interpret commentaries, particularly what she deemed "the false construction of those [Pauline] passages," with freedom of thought: "I examine any opinions of centuries standing, with as much freedom, and investigate them with as much care, as if they were of yesterday. I was educated to think for myself, and it is a privilege I shall always claim to exercise."[41] With this assertion, Grimké expressed "an axiom of American public thought" in the nineteenth century that "free people should read, think, and reason for themselves."[42] She, like any individual, including male translators and commentators, had the liberty "to discover the true meaning of sacred texts."[43] To emphasize the point, Grimké reiterated the phrase "free agent" in reference to herself several times in her *Letters*.[44]

As an intellectual free agent, Grimké railed "against the false translation of some passages [in the New Testament] by the MEN who did that work, and against the perverted interpretation by the MEN who undertook to write commentaries thereon." She expressed, as we saw, the conviction that, "when we are admitted to the honor of studying Greek and Hebrew, we shall produce some various readings of the Bible a little different from those we now have." For now, however, Grimké was dependent upon men for insight into the original biblical languages. According to Lerner, as a young girl, Grimké learned Greek alongside her brother, Thomas.[45] Nearly thirty years later, in an interpretation of the word "men" in Eph 4:8, she wrote: "I need hardly remark that man is a generic term, including both sexes."[46] However, her words, "I need hardly remark," belie her need to consult Henry C. Wright, an Andover-trained Congregational minister, about the Greek text. In a letter dated August 27, 1837, she asked about a simple point of Greek vocabulary, *viz*. whether *anthrōpois* is gender-inclusive, which, in this context, it clearly is.

[39] Ibid., 85.

[40] Ibid., 32.

[41] Ibid., 81.

[42] Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 36.

[43] Grimké, *Letters*, 30.

[44] Ibid., 4, 8.

[45] Lerner, *Grimké Sisters*, 14, 123.

[46] Grimké, *Letters*, 91.

Grimké had requested, "Please answer the following queries when time permits, so tell me if I append the right answers and then only answer such as I answer wrong[ly] or not at all. 1. Is man a generic term, Eph. 4.8? An. Yes."[47] Further, for an idiosyncratic interpretation of 1 Tim 2:8–12 based upon the Greek, as we shall see, she was reliant upon Joseph John Gurney, whose "skill as a biblical critic is well known in England."[48] While she may have criticized commentators, then, Grimké relied upon them for even a rudimentary knowledge of Hebrew and Greek.

Though she relied upon them, none of the commentaries Grimké cited—Henry, Scott, and Clarke—would elude her critique of men's "perverted interpretation." Not even Clarke, whose commentary funded many nineteenth-century defenders of a woman's right to preach, such as Elizabeth Wilson and Phoebe Palmer, escaped Grimké's criticism.[49] Even without knowledge of the Greek language, beyond a rudimentary level, Grimké functioned as a biblical commentator.

The Thirteenth Letter: Relation of Husband and Wife

In the thirteenth letter, Grimké addressed the issue of headship in 1 Cor 11:5 and the so-called *Haustafeln* (household codes) in Eph 5, Col 3, and 1 Pet 3. In her first citation of a commentary in this letter, Grimké cited Adam Clarke to demonstrate the general point that Paul's "mind was under the influence of Jewish prejudices respecting women." "The Jews," Clarke had written, "would not suffer a woman to *read* in the synagogue, although a *servant*, or even a *child*, had this permission."[50] Clarke's assessment of Judaism proved essential to Grimké throughout her analysis of Pauline texts; it provided a negative foil for the newfound freedom women experienced in Christ.

She referred next to Matthew Henry but not before making the general point that "the commentaries on this and similar texts [e.g., Eph 5:32] afford a striking illustration of the ideas which men entertain of their own superiority." Without pause, she then turned to "subjoin Henry's remarks on 1 Cor 11:5 as a specimen."[51] In this protracted quotation, Grimké, without any indication, omitted an entire section from Henry's commentary, beginning with the words, "This would be in a manner to declare," and concluding, "If she was made out of the man, and for the man, and made to be the glory of the man, she should do nothing, especially in public, that

[47] Ibid., 90. Barnes and Dumond, *Weld-Grimké Letters*, 1:438.

[48] Grimké, *Letters*, 94.

[49] See Phoebe Palmer, *Promise of the Father: Or, A Neglected Speciality of the Last Days; Addressed to the Clergy and Laity of All Christian Communities* (Boston: Degen, 1859); and Wilson, *Scriptural View of Woman's Rights.*

[50] Ibid., 81; Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: The Text Printed from the Most Correct Copies of the Present Authorized Translation, including the Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts; With a Commentary and Critical Notes Designed as a Help to Better Understanding of the Sacred Writings* (6 vols.; London: Tegg and Son, 1836) 6:1251.

[51] Grimké, *Letters*, 82.

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looks like a wish of having this order inverted."[52] This unacknowledged omission reveals Grimké's editorial license vis-à-vis the commentaries. It may be that the portion she retained was adequate to illustrate "the ideas which men entertain of their own superiority."

In a further effort to refute Henry, she next cited Psalm 8, in which "man" is made a little lower than the angels. "Surely," she commented, "if woman had been placed below man, and was to shine only by a lustre borrowed from him, we should have some clear evidence of it in the sacred volume. Henry puts her exactly on a level with the beasts; they were made for the use, help and comfort of man; and according to this commentator, this was the whole end and design of the creation of woman."[53] Grimké's assessment of Henry, if rhetorically compelling, is inaccurate. In his comments on 1 Cor 11:5, Henry had claimed that woman is "made superior to the other creatures here below, but in subjection to her husband, and deriving that honour from him out of whom she was made."[54] Given the tenor of his comments, the point may be moot, but he did not relegate woman to the realm of beasts; he said rather that she exercises dominion as God's image "at second-hand," in "subjection" to man, "a reflection of his glory" and "deriving that honour from him."[55] In other words, woman is possessed of glory and honor—but only derivatively. Grimké exhibited little patience with Henry's perspective: "The idea that man, as man is superior to woman, involved an absurdity so gross, that I really wonder how any man of reflection can receive it as of divine origin; I can only account for it . . . by that passion for supremacy, which characterizes man as a corrupt and fallen creature."[56]

Grimké also contended that Clarke's understanding of headship in the *Haustafeln* was faulty. To do this, she appealed to her assumption that all of scripture must be consistent. Grimké had demonstrated earlier that man cannot be woman's deity, that no "fallible being" could stand between woman and God.[57] She excoriated Milton, for instance, for portraying Adam as Eve's God.[58] When a commentator such as Clarke said such things as "so is man the head, or governor of the woman," or when he averred that the woman's subjection is "God's ordinance, and should not be transgressed," he violated what Grimké deemed a fundamental scriptural principle: no one should take the place of God.[59]

[52] Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments: Wherein Each Chapter Is Summed up in Its Contents, the Sacred Text Inserted at Large in Distinct Paragraphs, Each Paragraph Reduced to Its Proper Heads, the Sense Given and Largely Illustrated; With Practical Remarks and Observations* (6 vols.; 7th ed.; Edinburgh: MacFarquhar, 1770) 6:241.

[53] Grimké, *Letters*, 83.

[54] Henry, *Exposition*, 6:241–42.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Grimké, *Letters*, 83.

[57] Ibid., 78.

[58] Ibid., 81.

[59] Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1455; Grimké, *Letters*, 84.

She supplemented her citation of Clarke with one from Henry that she considered more egregious. "Henry goes even further" in this understanding of male headship: "the metaphor is taken from the head in the natural body, which being the seat of reason, of wisdom, and of knowledge, and the fountain of sense and motion, is more excellent than the rest of the body."[60] Grimké contended instead, commenting upon the story of Cain and Abel, that any superiority of men "could not allude to any thing but physical dominion."[61] Previously, in her third letter, she had written similarly, "if physical weaknesses is alluded to, I cheerfully concede the superiority; if brute force is what my brethren are claiming, I am willing to let them have all the honor they desire; but if they mean to intimate, that moral or intellectual weakness belongs to woman, more than to man, I utterly disclaim the charge."[62] Grimké then concluded her thirteenth letter with a rejoinder to Clarke and Henry: if man is woman's governor, "he must be able to save her," but, of course he cannot, since no one can redeem another's soul.[63]

In the short compass of a single letter, Grimké implemented all four of the assumptions she brought to her interpretative task. She conceded, on the basis of Clarke's commentary, that Paul was biased by Jewish tradition, though she did not, with this realization, eschew the notion of inspiration. Second, by arguing that Clarke's comments on headship violated a dominant biblical principle—for a human being to take the place of God is idolatry—she employed her principle of consistency within the Bible. Her third assumption, the moral parity of men and women, rendered "the ideas which men entertain of their own superiority" false and infeasible. Finally, she exercised independence of thought when she omitted a large portion within a quotation from Matthew Henry's commentary without annotation or indication. It is not only her editing that evinces her independence of thought, but all of these assumptions put into play make her a biblical interpreter in her own right.

The Fourteenth Letter: Ministry of Women

While interpreting the Old Testament in her thirteenth and fourteenth letters, Grimké did not cite a single commentary.[64] However, when she turned her attention to the story of Pentecost in Acts 2, followed by 1 Cor 11, 14, and 1 Tim 2—the intractable

[60] Grimké, *Letters*, 85.

[61] Ibid., 78.

[62] Ibid., 39.

[63] Ibid., 85. She attributed this to a note on Ps 49:8 in a French Bible.

[64] She did, however, cite Anthony Blackwall with reference to a variant in the Greek: Israel in lieu of Jerusalem, which suggests "that religious Jews, from distant places, came thither to divine offices, and would with high pleasure hear the discourses of this great prophetess." Grimké paraphrased the variant reading and omits the Greek words (Grimké, *Letters*, 89; Anthony Blackwall, *The Sacred Classics Defended and Illustrated: Or, an Essay Humbly Offered Towards Proving the Purity, Propriety, and True Eloquence of the Writers of the New Testament* [2 vols.; 1727–1731; repr., New York: Garland, 1970] 2:291–92).

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Pauline texts to which appeal was made to undergird the superiority of men—she cited commentaries and books at length.

A. Acts 2: Women at Pentecost

According to Grimké, "men and women are classed together" at Pentecost, and they both received from the Holy Spirit the ability to preach the gospel. She concluded her discussion of Pentecost with this observation: "Women then, according to the Bible, were, under the New Testament dispensation, as well as the Old, the recipients of the gift of prophecy."[65] To demonstrate that this was "no sectarian view," she cited four authors, three with attribution—Thomas Stratten, Thomas Scott, and Matthew Henry—and one, Joseph John Gurney, without attribution.[66]

Stratten argued in *The Book of the Priesthood* that, at Pentecost, "the whole company of the assembled disciples, male and female, young and old, were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance."[67] Scott noted similarly that tongues as of fire "sat on every one present . . . the whole company were abundantly replenished with the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit: so that they began to speak with other tongues."[68] This statement is not insignificant because Scott held to a belief that limited a woman's right to preach, though here, in his commentary on Pentecost, he did more than concede the point; he *argued* that everyone, the whole company, spoke in other tongues, that is, spoke publicly. Grimké might even have cited further corroboration—though she did not—from Scott, who wrote, "There seems therefore no sufficient reason for supposing, that this first effusion of the Spirit was exclusively bestowed on the apostles."[69]

Henry, despite his opposition to a woman's right to preach, provided further fodder for Grimké when he wrote that the Spirit fell during Pentecost on "all" who had been in the upper room—men and women both. Grimké quoted this passage from Henry:

> It seems evident to me, that not the twelve apostles only, but all the [one] hundred and twenty disciples were filled with the Holy Ghost alike at this time: all the seventy disciples, who were apostolical men, and employed in the same work, and all the rest too that were to preach the gospel; for it is said expressly, Eph. iv. 8–12: "that when Christ ascended up on high," (which

[65] Grimké, *Letters*, 90. Like other female authors, including Deborah Peirce, Hannah Mather Crocker, Maria Stewart, Nancy Towle, Harriet Livermore, Sarah Righter Major, and Jarena Lee, whose writings in support of women's public speaking preceded her letters, Grimké enumerated a litany of biblical women who prophesied. See Grimké, *Letters*, 87–89.

[66] Ibid., 90.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.; Scott, *Holy Bible*, on Acts 2:2–3.

[69] Scott, *Holy Bible*, on Acts 2:1.

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> refers to this here) "he gave gifts unto men." The *all* here, must refer to the *all* that were together.[70]

Small differences distinguish Grimké's citation of Henry's commentary. For reasons inaccessible to us, Grimké referred to Eph 4:8–12; Henry had referred to Eph 4:8, 11. Further, she did not italicize "all." More significant, she omitted, again without indication, the section of text between the words "he gave gifts unto men" and "the all here, must refer to the all that were together." Henry had written, "'*not only* some apostles,' such were the twelve; but some prophets, and some evangelists, such were many of the seventy disciples, itinerant preachers, and some pastors and teachers settled in particular churches, as we may suppose some of these afterward were."[71] In this instance, it is possible to explain Grimké's omission. Henry's commentary in this omission concerns the diversity of gifts listed in Ephesians rather than the point Grimké wished to make about Acts 2, namely that the Spirit fell upon men *and women*.

Though none of these three authors apparently shared Grimké's conviction that "whatever is *morally* right for a man to do, is *morally* right for a woman to do," she still cited them to bolster her argument that Pentecost entailed the inspiration of men *and women*. When she included a block of text from an author who supported a woman's right to preach, her quotation is without attribution. Quaker author Joseph John Gurney had written:

> Nor is there any thing either astonishing or novel in this particular direction of the gifts of the Spirit. Nothing astonishing, because there is no respect of persons with God; the soul of the woman, in his sight, is as the soul of the man, and both are alike susceptible of the extraordinary as well as the general influences of his Spirit. Nothing novel, because, in the sacred records of antiquity, there are found numerous examples of women as well as of men, who were impelled to speak to others on matters of religion, by the direct and immediate visitations of the Holy Ghost.[72]

Grimké included a similar block of text:

> Surely there is nothing either astonishing or novel in the gifts of the Spirit being bestowed on woman: nothing astonishing, because there is no respect

[70] Grimké, *Letters*, 90.

[71] Henry, *Exposition*, 6:9.

[72] Joseph John Gurney, *Observations on the Religious Peculiarities of the Society of Friends* (2nd American ed.; Philadelphia: Thomas Kite, 1832) 195–96. Janis Calvo argues that Quakers in the early nineteenth century advanced this argumentation as the foundation for women ministers. As evidence, Calvo cites as paradigmatic a line from this quotation of Gurney, that "both [men and women] are alike capable of the extraordinary as well as the general influences of his Spirit." Calvo also includes Josiah Martin's comments on 1 Cor 14:34–35: "In concisely summarizing the Quaker attitude toward a female ministry, Martin writes, 'We say, women are to keep silent in the Church, until the Lord, by his Spirit shall move upon their hearts, and open their mouths'" (Janis Calvo, "Quaker Women Ministers in Nineteenth Century America," *Quaker History* 63 [1974] 75–93, at 78–79). Grimké assiduously avoided this basis for a woman's right to preach, although she spent more than a decade with the Quakers.

> of persons with God; the soul of woman in his sight is as the soul of the man, and both are alike capable of the influence of the Holy Spirit. Nothing novel, because, as has been already shown, in the sacred records there are found examples of women, as well as of men, exercising the gift of prophecy.[73]

The more general character of Grimke's use of literary sources emerges from this quotation. First, she quoted sources verbatim without attribution. Second, she omitted portions of quotations. In this instance, she did not include the conception of "direct and immediate visitations of the Holy Ghost." We will see later that this notion of a direct influence from the Holy Spirit as the basis for a woman's right to preach is an element of the commentaries she assiduously erased. Third, she reduced a much longer paragraph on female Old Testament prophets, whom Gurney had discussed at length. Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Huldah, Anna, Elizabeth, Mary, even the wife of Isaiah, who, Gurney said, "was a prophetess,"[74] Grimké reduced to "examples of women, as well as of men, exercising the gift of prophecy." In short, Grimké exercised a good deal of freedom in her handling of sources, as she quoted, omitted, and abbreviated them.

B. 1 Corinthians 11: Women Preaching

In letter fourteen, Grimké began her discussion of Pauline texts by reminding readers that, in 1 Cor 11, Paul corrects abuses that crept into the Corinthian church. Women praying and prophesying with uncovered heads was an abuse since, in that day, it was immodest and immoral. A shaven—uncovered—head was a "punishment that was inflicted upon women of bad character."[75] To support this view, Grimké offered a somewhat puzzling quotation from Scott's commentary: "These things . . . the apostle stated as decent and proper, but if any of the Corinthian teachers inclined to excite contention about them, he would only add, v. 16, that he and his brethren knew of no such custom as prevailed among them, nor was there any such in the churches of God which had been planted by the other apostles."[76] It is possible to conjecture that Grimké quoted Scott because appeal to custom took the matter of covered heads from the realm of natural law to custom, from the immutable to the malleable.

Grimké then quoted John Locke twice because, as she said, his experience of two female preachers prompted him to support women's preaching. In the first verbatim quotation, taken from Locke's notes on the letters of the Apostle Paul, he wrote, "as to prophesying, the apostle in express words tells us, Ch. 14:3, 12, that it was speaking in the assembly. The same is evident as to praying, that the

[73] Grimké, *Letters*, 88; See Gurney, *Observations*, 195–96.

[74] Gurney, *Observations*, 196.

[75] Grimké, *Letters*, 91.

[76] Ibid. See Scott, *Holy Bible*, on 1 Cor 11:2–16. Grimké's quotation is nearly verbatim, though she modified Scott's "inclinable" to "inclined," added a reference to v. 16, punctuated differently, and did not capitalize, as had Scott, "churches."

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apostle means by it publicly with an audible voice, ch. 14:19."[77] In the second, Grimké quoted verbatim from Locke's letter to the two women preachers, Rebecca Collier and Rachel Bracken. He contended that women "had the honor of first publishing the resurrection of the God of love—why not again the resurrection of the spirit of love? And let all the disciples of Christ rejoice therein, as doth your partner, John Locke."[78]

Next, Grimké turned to commentator Adam Clarke on 1 Cor 11:5:

> Whatever may be the meaning of praying and prophesying, in respect to the man, they have precisely the same meaning in respect to the woman. So that some women at least, as well as some men, might speak to others to edification, and exhortation, and comfort. And this kind of prophesying or teaching was predicted by Joel, Joel ii. 28, and referred to by Peter, Acts ii. 17. And had there not been such gifts bestowed on women, the prophesy [*sic.*] could not have had its fulfillment.[79]

A comparison of this quotation with its fuller context in Clarke's commentary illuminates Grimké's interests. Clarke, after this digression on Pentecost, returned to his discussion of head coverings in 1 Cor 11:5. Grimké, not following Clarke and consequently ignoring his remarks on 1 Cor 11:5, turned instead to quote from Clarke's autobiography, in which his hearing two women preach led him to realize "that though he had been prejudiced against women's preaching, he could not but confess that these women were anointed for the office."[80] There is symmetry to Grimké's thought that structures this portion of her letter: two men (Locke and Clarke) each heard two women, had their minds changed, and wrote in defense of a woman's right to preach.

C. 1 Corinthians 14: Women Silenced

Grimké then turned in earnest to a particularly thorny text: 1 Cor 14:34–35. She prefaced her interpretation with an allusion to 2 Pet 3:16, which casts aspersions on Paul's letters, and her assessment that "most commentators, having their minds preoccupied with the prejudices of education, afford little aid; they rather tend to darken the text by the multitude of words."[81]

Notwithstanding this indictment, commentaries proved pivotal to her interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34–35. With the aid of Clarke, Grimké interpreted Paul's command for women to be silent as the legacy of Judaism, which, Clarke had

[77] John Locke, *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Galatians, Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians. To which is prefixed, an essay for the understanding of St. Paul's Epistles, by consulting St. Paul himself* (London: Printed for T. Longman, et al., 1794) 138. Locke's notes and annotations were first published posthumously, 1705–1707.

[78] Grimké, *Letters*, 92.

[79] Ibid.; Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1221. Grimké misspelled "prophecy" as "prophesy" and did not italicize words from the biblical text, as did Clarke.

[80] Grimké, *Letters*, 92–93.

[81] Ibid., 93.

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contended, was a religion in which "a woman should know nothing but the use of her distaff."[82] She reiterated the saying of Rabbi Eliezer that Clarke had cited, "let the words of the law be burned, rather than that they should be delivered by women," though she slightly misquoted Clarke, whose citation referred to the law "delivered to women"; her version read "delivered by women." There is no evidence to suggest the change is other than inadvertent, though her version, with the word "by" rather than "to," presents women as teachers rather than recipients of the law.[83] Clarke's assessment of Judaism allowed Grimké to suggest that Christian women at Corinth, with their newfound freedom, flaunted synagogue customs and disrupted the decorum of worship.

At this point, Grimké interrupted her quotation of Clarke with a rhetorical question that is superfluous to her argument but barbed toward her opponents. "Are there not many of our Christian brethren," she quipped, "whose hostility to the ministry of women is as bitter as was that of Rabbi Eliezer, and who would rather let souls perish, than that the truths of the gospel should be delivered by women?"[84] After posing this rhetorical question, Grimké returned to the same excerpt from Clarke's commentary. In other words, she temporarily paused the quotation to address pointedly her contemporary context. Only then did she return to Clarke's commentary, a resource crucial to her effort to resolve the tension between the praying and prophesying of women in 1 Cor 11 and Paul's injunction to silence in 1 Cor 14. The following quotation from Clarke's commentary gathers together salient strands in her argument: the prophecy of Joel 2; its fulfilment at Pentecost; 1 Cor 11:5; and 1 Cor 14:34–35. In brief, this apposite quotation from Clarke collects the pieces of her argument:

> This was their condition till the time of the Gospel, when, according to the prediction of Joel, the Spirit of God was to be poured out on the women as well as the men, that they might prophesy, i. e. teach. And that they did prophesy or teach is evident from what the apostle says, chap. xi. 5, where he lays down rules to regulate this part of their conduct while ministering in the church. But does not what the apostle says here contradict that statement, and show that the words in chap. 11 should be understood in another sense? For, here it is expressly said that they should keep silence in the church; for it was not permitted to a woman to speak. Both places seem perfectly consistent. It is evident from the context that the apostle refers here to asking questions, and what we call dictating in the assemblies.[85]

In the following portion of the commentary, which Grimké chose not to include, Clarke offered his resolution of the tension between 1 Cor 11 and 1 Cor 14 when he distinguished an inspired woman, who "received any particular *influence from God* to enable her to teach" (1 Cor 11), from women who were divisive and disruptive

[82] Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1250.
[83] Grimké, *Letters,* 93–94; Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1250.
[84] Grimké, *Letters*, 94.
[85] Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1250. Grimké, *Letters*, 94, cites Clarke with slight variations.

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(1 Cor 14): "All that the apostle opposes here is their *questioning*, *finding fault*, *disputing*, &c., in the Christian Church, as the Jewish men were permitted to do in their synagogues; together with the attempts to usurp any authority over the man, by setting up their judgment in *opposition* to them." Such women—the women of 1 Cor 14—could not be "under the influence of the Spirit of God."[86]

By distinguishing between inspired and uninspired women, Clarke joined the company of earlier commentators. For instance, Henry, in commenting upon 1 Cor 14, maintained that silence for women belonged to "general prohibitions . . . in common cases." In contrast, he acknowledged those "extraordinary occasions, when women were under a divine *afflatus,* and known to be so, they might have liberty of speech."[87] In other words, women could speak but only on those occasions when they were "under a divine *afflatus*."

Scott, like Henry and Clarke, had conjectured that "several women" referred to in 1 Cor 11 "had been endued with the Spirit of prophecy, which enabled them, by immediate inspiration, to offer prayers for the congregation, or to give instruction."[88] In contrast, the women of 1 Cor 14, whom Paul told to be silent, were "not under any immediate or extraordinary impulse of the Holy Spirit."[89] Scott inferred that "it seems most natural to suppose, that some of the Corinthian women were used to speak publicly, when not under any immediate or extraordinary impulse of the Holy Spirit; and perhaps they interrupted the other speakers by inquiries or objections, according to the disputatious spirit that prevailed." These women, according to Scott, should ask husbands their questions at home, "for it was inconsistent with modesty and propriety, and would be scandalous among their neighbours, for women to make a practice of discoursing in the public assemblies."[90]

Grimké stood against the commentators, who were unanimous on this point. She would not concede that women could teach because they "were under a divine *afflatus*" (Henry) or "under any immediate or extraordinary impulse of the Holy Spirit" (Scott) or under "any particular influence from God to enable her to teach" (Clarke). Her view, instead, rested on the fundamental conviction that women could speak in public—could even be ministers—on the basis of "the Scripture doctrine of the perfect equality of man and woman, which is the fundamental principle of my argument in favor of the ministry of women."[91] She made no appeal to a special endowment of the Spirit. Even Pentecost, for Grimké, did not offer precedent for an extraordinary endowment: "There is not the least intimation that this was a spasmodic influence which was soon to cease. The men and women are classed together; and if the power to preach the gospel was a supernatural and short-lived

[86] Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1251.
[87] Henry, *Exposition*, 6:250–51.
[88] Scott, *Holy Bible*, on 1 Cor 11:2–16.
[89] Ibid., on 1 Cor 14:34–35.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Grimké, *Letters*, 85.

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impulse in women, then it was equally so in men."[92] The "gift of prophecy," to which Grimké referred on several occasions in this letter, is not an intermittent impulse but the enduring prerogative of the prophet.

How then did Grimké resolve the tension between 1 Cor 11 and 1 Cor 14? She noticed, first, that Paul is preoccupied in 1 Cor 14, as in 1 Cor 11, with tempering abuses. Paul commands men to be silent when they fall into "certain abuses," like speaking without an interpreter (1 Cor 14:28) or speaking while another person talked (14:30, 31–33). "He then proceeds to notice the disorderly conduct of the women, who were guilty of other improprieties," which arose, Grimké surmised, from the freedom they experienced in this new religion. "The apostle disapproved of this, because it disturbed the solemnity of the meeting: he therefore admonishes the women to keep silence in the churches."[93]

Grimké examined, as well, the command for women to learn at home from husbands. She determined that learners, not teachers, were the recipients of this command. She cited the all-important line from 1 Cor 14:34 with italics for emphasis: "If they will *learn* anything, let them ask their husbands at home." "Now a person endowed with a gift in the ministry," she inferred, "does not ask questions in the public exercise of that gift, for the purpose of gaining information: she is instructing others."[94] Women who needed to *learn* were told to be silent in church and ask questions at home. This command did not apply to women who *taught* others. She cinched her interpretation by noting how Paul ended the chapter with an exhortation: "Wherefore, brethren (a generic term, applying equally to men and women), covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:39).[95] This exhortation is directed neither to men nor to women but to both.

D. 1 Timothy 2: Women as Teachers

Having dispensed with 1 Cor 11 and 14, Grimké directed her attention to the third intractable Pauline text, 1 Tim 2:8–15. Her interpretation is indebted almost entirely to Gurney, though traces of Clarke, albeit unacknowledged, do surface. She began by noting that English translations often misrepresent the Greek original with "punctuation and division into chapters and verses" that are "no part of the original arrangement." These misrepresentations include "the injudicious separation of sentences."[96] For evidence of this in 1 Tim 2, Grimké quoted Gurney, noting that his "skill as a biblical critic is well known in England."[97]

[92] Ibid., 89.
[93] Ibid., 93.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid., 94.
[97] Ibid.

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> It [1 Tim 2:8–9] is worded in a manner somewhat obscure; but appears to be construed according to the opinion of various commentators (See Pool's *[sic.]* synopsis) as conveying an injunction, that women as well as men should pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting. I Tim. 2:8, 9. "I will therefore that men pray everywhere, &c.; likewise also the women in a modest dress." (Compare I Cor. 11:5.) "I would have them adorn themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety."[98]

Gurney's exposition requires clarification. The King James Version separates verses 8 and 9; verse eight is about men's prayers and verse nine about women's apparel.

> I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting. (1 Tim 2:8)
>
> In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array. (1 Tim 2:9)

Gurney, following unspecified commentaries, had suggested that the controlling verb is *pray*. How should men pray? By lifting up hands and eschewing wrath and doubt. How should women pray? With modest apparel, respect, and self-control rather than decorated hair, gold, pearls, and expensive apparel.

This interpretation serves Grimké's purpose, but it is questionable. The controlling verb is not "pray" (προσεύχομαι), as Gurney claimed, but "will" (βούλομαι). This verb is followed by two complementary infinitives with subjects in the accusative case: προσεύχεσθαι τοὺς ἄνδρας; and γυναῖκας . . . κοσμεῖν ἑαυτάς. Paul desires (βούλομαι) men to pray (προσεύχεσθαι) and women to adorn themselves (κοσμεῖν ἑαυτάς). The Greek is clear, and the King James Bible clearly represents it. Nonetheless, Grimké concluded, "I have no doubt this [Gurney's] is the true meaning of the text, and that translators would never have thought of altering it had they not been under the influence of educational prejudice."[99]

Two other interpretative points evince no relationship to commentaries. Grimké focused upon the word "profess" in 1 Tim 2:10, which reads, "but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" (KJV). This verb, claimed Grimké, is better rendered "preaching godliness, or enjoining piety to the gods, or conducting public worship."[100] This interpretation of the verb ἐπαγγέλλομαι, however, is not supported by its usage throughout the New Testament, in which it typically refers to a promise spoken or unspoken (e.g., Mark 14:11; Acts 7:5; Gal 3:19; Heb 6:13; James 1:12; 1 John 2:25). Her reading of this verb overemphasizes its relation to public worship. She also discussed the "improprieties which prevailed in the Ephesian church." This interpretation mirrors what she wrote on 1 Cor 14:34–35. Women in Ephesus, as at Corinth, with their newfound freedom, spoke out of turn when they asked questions. Grimké quoted 1 Tim 2:11 in full, with "learn" capitalized

[98] Ibid. Gurney, *Observations*, ch. 8.
[99] Grimké, *Letters*, 95.
[100] Ibid.

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because a woman who learns is *not* a woman who teaches, so the command here cannot refer to teachers. "Here again it is evident that the women, of whom he was speaking, were admonished to learn in silence, which could not refer to their public ministrations to others."[101]

When she addressed the meaning of teaching in 1 Tim 2:8–9, she still did not cite the commentators, but, in this instance, her words indicate a reliance upon them. Grimké wrote laconically that the verb "teach" "may in this place more properly be rendered dictate." By "dictate," she seems to have meant what Clarke had said about 1 Cor 14:34, which she had cited earlier in her letter: "the apostle refers here to asking questions, and what we call dictating in the assemblies."[102] Yet she was not dependent exclusively upon Clarke. Her exact words, "the verb, 'to teach' . . . is one of very general import, and may in this place more properly be rendered dictate," belie her dependence upon Gurney, who observed that the verb "teach" in 1 Tim 2:12 "is one of very general import."[103] As with Clarke, she incorporated insights from Gurney's book without attribution. No less noteworthy is that she conflated the general observation of Gurney with the particular interpretation of Clarke: teaching can mean many things (Gurney), but it means dictating (Clarke) in this context.

It is curious, given her praise of Gurney's interpretative skills, that she reproduced his exact phrase but then did not follow his subsequent interpretation of the meaning of teaching but opted instead to import Clarke's from his comments on 1 Cor 14:34–35.[104] In order to explain why Grimké did not follow Gurney at this point, it is necessary to understand Gurney's attempt to hold simultaneously to a woman's right to preach and Paul's prohibition of women's teaching in 1 Tim 2. In essence, he argued that the teaching from which women were excluded "is repeatedly *distinguished* by this apostle from the gift of *prophecy* or *preaching*." Prophecy or preaching arises from "spontaneous and divine effusions," such as are described in 1 Cor 14. Teaching, in contrast, rests upon "the assumption of personal authority," such as elders and overseers possessed (see 1 Tim 3:2).[105] This form of teaching women were forbidden to do, according to Gurney. Thus, we may surmise that Grimké reproduced none of Gurney's thinking for two reasons. First, he espoused a distinction between inspired prophets and authoritative teachers that allowed women to preach or prophesy when they had a special infusion of the Spirit; this

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid., 94. See Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1250.

[103] Grimké, *Letters*, 95; Gurney, *Observations*, 200.

[104] Some inconsistencies with citations may be due to the unfinished form of Grimké's letters. Bartlett, who edited them from the original documents, observes, "none is in a finished, polished form. They are rough, with many additions and deletions, quotations sometimes randomly thrown in, sometimes without clear beginning and concluding paragraphs, often with long run-on sentences or without any sentence structure at all" (Bartlett, "Note on the Editing Process," in *Letters* [ed. Bartlett], ix–x, at ix).

[105] Gurney, *Observations*, 186 (italics in original).

basis for a woman's right to preach she eschewed. Second, he excluded women from a certain form of teaching. This, too, would have been unacceptable to Grimké.

Having documented Grimké's reliance upon Gurney for essential elements of her interpretation of 1 Tim 2, we should point out that there is a dramatic drop-off in her explicit use of the commentaries of Henry, Scott, and Clarke. For Scott and Henry, this is hardly surprising. On 1 Tim 2:9–15, Henry wrote, "here is a charge, that women that profess the Christian religion should be modest, and sober, and silent, and submissive, as becomes their place."[106] Scott offered similar commentary,[107] as well as other points Grimké had already refuted elsewhere in her letters. He had connected ministers to Israelite priests, who were male, and then advised, "in like manner, women must not be ministers or preachers under the Christian dispensation."[108] He also drew a distinction between inspired and uninspired women that, we have seen, Grimké repudiated.[109]

What then of Adam Clarke? As he wrote in his commentary, most of what needed to be said about 1 Tim 2 he had already dealt with while interpreting 1 Cor 11 and 14. What was left to say about 1 Tim 2 fell squarely in line with his predecessors.[110] For instance, he cited "a Greek verse . . . γυναικι δ αρχειν ου διδωσιν η φυσις. For nature suffers not a woman's rule," and concluded, "God has not only rendered her unfit for it, but he has subjected her, expressly, to the government of the man."[111] Consequently, despite the help his commentary was to Grimké, even in her definition of teaching in 1 Tim 2, it proved of little use to her. Nevertheless, although Grimké tended to cite Clarke sparingly in this context, she was undoubtedly reliant upon him not only for her definition of teaching-as-dictating but also for her laconic reference to constrictive "Jewish traditions and heathen customs."[112]

Sarah Grimké's Legacy

While composing her letters on the equality of the sexes, Sarah Grimké acknowledged the opposition she would face: "I have written eight letters on the Province of woman. In the next two I shall take up the subject of the ministry of women and those I do not expect Wm. S. Porter will publish, but I heard thro' thee

[106] Henry, *Exposition*, 6:348.

[107] Scott, *Holy Bible*, on 1 Tim 2:9–10.

[108] Ibid., on 1 Tim 2:8.

[109] Ibid., on 1 Tim 2:11–14.

[110] Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1596. See Grimké, *Letters*, 39, 78. To man's physical superiority, which Clarke drew from the creation of Adam first, Grimké could assent.

[111] Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1596.

[112] Grimké, *Letters*, 95. Grimké did not elucidate further what she meant by "Jewish traditions and heathen customs," but her earlier quotation of Clarke suggests that his assessment of Judaism lay at the base of her conception of Judaism, according to which women were to keep silent. As to "heathen customs," Clarke had made passing reference, in relation to 1 Tim 2:12, to similar prohibitions in Roman law (e.g., the Pandects) (Clarke, *Holy Bible*, 6:1596). It is not difficult to suggest, as Grimké did, that women once bound by the constraints of "Jewish traditions and heathen cultures," as Clarke had delineated them, overstepped the boundaries of their newfound freedom.

and brother Philbrick that Knapp was willing to publish them in pamphlet form."[113] Even as she wrote, she anticipated resistance and rejection. Yet Sarah Grimké still wrote. And, as she wrote, she engaged the most influential commentators of her day: Matthew Henry, Thomas Scott, and Adam Clarke, alongside Joseph John Gurney. Grimké cited them copiously but not uncritically, such as when she censured Henry and Clarke for their interpretations of headship in Eph 5. Nonetheless, the very commentators she criticized became the ballast for her perspective when they supported her position, such as Thomas Scott, for example, because he claimed that the Spirit descended upon men *and women* at Pentecost. She also adopted dubious interpretations, such as Gurney's on the syntax of 1 Tim 2:8–9 because it proved amenable to her point of view. On occasion, she misinterpreted the commentaries (e.g., Henry on Ps 8). Sometimes she interrupted a quotation (e.g., Clarke on Judaism) with a polemical barb or deleted portions for reasons that prove elusive to us. And sometimes she depended upon them, even quoted them, without attribution.

Setting her letters against the backdrop of commentaries draws attention to Grimké's independence of thought in two respects. The first, of course, consists of her strident rejection of any notion that women are inferior, that they should be subordinate and subject to the headship of men. Henry's and Scott's commentaries are rife with such notions, which they underscored through repetition. Grimké found Clarke's commentary more amenable, though not his interpretation of the subjection of women to men, either in his treatment of the *Haustafeln* or 1 Tim 2.

The commentaries also help to highlight, by contrast, how Grimké settled perceived tensions in Pauline texts. Henry, Scott, and Clarke distinguished between inspired female prophets and uninspired women who interrupted and usurped authority. Gurney differed from them by distinguishing inspired prophets, some of whom were women, from male overseers, who taught not by inspiration but by authority. Grimké rejected the commentators' and Gurney's solutions and instead divided women into teachers and learners. Only women who needed to *learn* were to be silent; *teachers* were not.

Grimké's *Letters* were well received by leading woman's rights advocates, such as Abby Kelley, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucy Stone. Mott, for instance, ranked the *Letters* alongside Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 publication, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.[114] Yet the same cannot be said about her work as a biblical commentator. During the two decades following the publication of *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, American women did not refer in any meaningful way to the biblical interpretation found in them. In 1849, for instance, Elizabeth Wilson referred to Angelina and Sarah Grimké twice each, though without extensive interaction. Wilson's first reference to Grimké's *Letters* contains an extensive quote

[113] Barnes and Dumond, *Weld-Grimké Letters*, 1:438.

[114] Gerda Lerner, *The Feminist Thought of Sarah Grimké* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 27. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures On Political and Moral Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1792).

from the Pastoral Letter that censured her rather than from Grimké herself. Wilson's second reference is to dress, which Grimké had discussed in her eleventh letter.[115] In the same year, Oberlin College student Antoinette Brown published a study of 1 Cor 14:34–35 and 1 Tim 2:11–12 in the *Oberlin Quarterly*. There is no evidence in her article that she consulted Grimké's *Letters*. In the 1859 publication, *The Promise of the Father*, Methodist holiness evangelist Phoebe Palmer, who referred on nearly every page to a breadth of commentators, made no reference to Grimké.

Not even Grimké's friend, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or the female revising committee of *The Woman's Bible*, with its more than twenty members, interacted with Grimké's biblical interpretation. For all of its merits, *The Woman's Bible* is the lesser for this. This assessment is perhaps nowhere clearer than in its commentary on 1 Cor 14:34–35, which reads: "The church at Corinth was peculiarly given to diversion and to disputation; and women were apt to join in and to ask many troublesome questions; hence they were advised to consult their husband at home." Such a general observation about recalcitrant women might have been extrapolated from many of the commentators who had written on 1 Cor 14:34–35; this interpretation was standard fare. What follows in *The Woman's Bible* is also generic: "There is such a wide difference of opinion on this point among wise men, that perhaps it would be as safe to leave women to be guided by their own unassisted common sense."[116] Grimké had offered more than this. She had engaged many of those "wise men," and she had sought seriously, in debate with them, a solution that undermined the silence of women through the rich interplay of various biblical texts and the commentary offered on them by leading thinkers of her day. She was herself a commentator, and it is a loss that her interpretative skill was not preserved in subsequent works.[117]

Yet, in a more oblique way, Grimké did leave a legacy. She had imagined a day when, even without "the honor of studying Greek and Hebrew," women would "produce some various readings of the Bible a little different from those we now have." This statement was prescient. During the two decades following the publication of *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, other American women, like Grimké, incorporated the insights of commentaries. Elizabeth Wilson utilized an even wider array of commentaries than Grimké. Antoinette Brown, though citing only two Greek lexicons in her article, confided in a letter to her friend, Lucy Stone,

[115] Wilson, *Scriptural View of Woman's Rights*, 348, 356.

[116] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1895–98; repr. Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974) 335. For more on *The Woman's Bible*, see Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton's Bible* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[117] Gerda Lerner may well be accurate in her assessment of the legacy of Grimké's *Letters*: "This important earlier work left no seeming imprint on Stanton's work of Bible criticism. On the contrary, she and her collaborators stressed repeatedly the uniqueness of their enterprise. Possibly this was due to their very real alienation from religious thought and their rejection of all feminist Bible criticism which came from within the Christian frame of reference. More likely, it reflects the pattern of the invisibility of prior women's work to the women successors." Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 165.

"I have been examining the Bible position of woman a good deal this winter reading various commentaries, comparing them with each other and with the Bible."[118] Phoebe Palmer cited commentaries extensively, along with the works of such leading Methodists as Joseph Benson, Joseph Sutcliffe, and John Wesley, though she did so less critically than Grimké. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the authors of *The Woman's Bible* quoted from renowned commentators Thomas Scott and Adam Clarke. While interaction with commentaries would become de rigueur in many defenses of a woman's right to preach for the remainder of the nineteenth century, culminating in 1895 in the publication of *The Woman's Bible*, Sarah Grimké holds the position as the first American woman to do so in a serious and sustained way.

[118] Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, 68. Antoinette Brown to Lucy Stone, 18 March 1848, Blackwell Family Papers.

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