



The Religious Roots of Abolition

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Framing Question

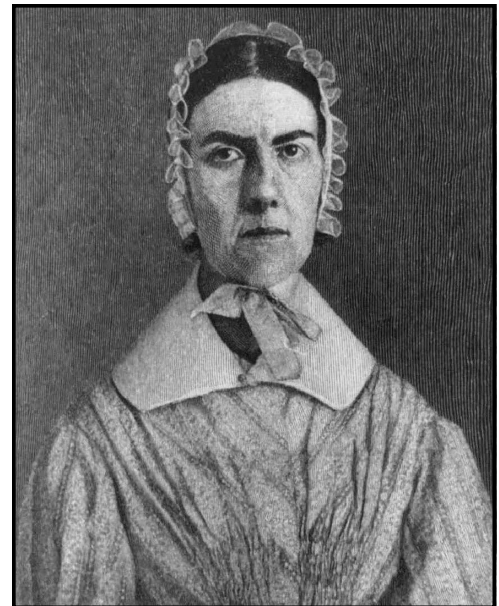
How did American Christians in the nineteenth century come to see slavery as something that needed to be abolished?

Understanding

Christianity was a central feature of nineteenth-century American life for both slaveholders and anti-slavery activists. To argue persuasively against slavery, abolitionists had to find ways to use the Bible and Christian tradition, along with American patriotic and domestic ideals, to make their case.

Text

Angelina Grimké, "[Appeal to the Christian Women of the South](#),"
The Anti-Slavery Examiner, 1836 (excerpts).



Angelina Grimké (1805–1879)

Background

By the 1830s growing numbers of Protestant evangelicals in northern states grew convinced that slavery was a sin that must be stopped immediately and at all costs. But they faced a great obstacle: the Bible, the book that the vast majority of Americans, North and South, looked to for guidance, contained many passages that sanctioned the slave system. Slave owners and their supporters readily pointed to chapters in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, which outlined the many laws surrounding slavery but did not condemn it. Even the New Testament, in a plain reading, called on slaves to obey their masters and to "regard them worthy of all honor."

Anti-slavery supporters knew that they needed to appeal to Christianity to make their case. But how to go about it? Angelina Grimké (1805–1879), the daughter of distinguished South Carolina slaveholders, was raised in the Episcopal Church. Always outspoken, she converted to the more evangelical Presbyterian Church at a young age, and increasingly became convinced that slavery was an immoral and unchristian system that denied human rights. Expelled by the southern Presbyterians for her views on slavery and the equality of women, she left the South for

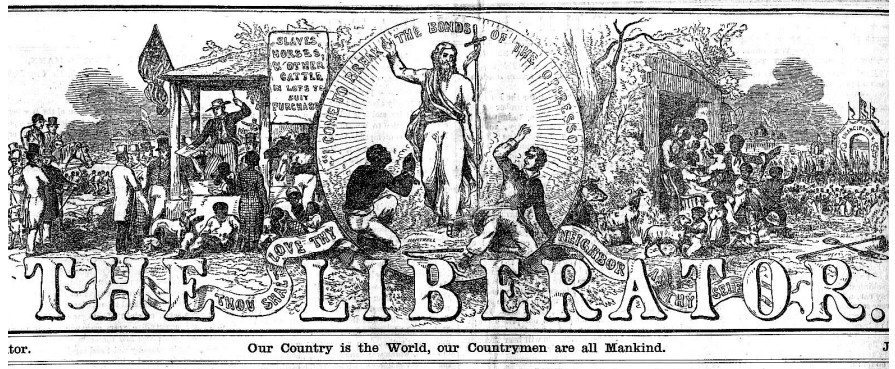
Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

Philadelphia and joined the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), another evangelical group that had been the earliest and most ardent opponents of slavery.

In Philadelphia Grimké associated with leaders of the abolitionist movement, and she began writing for their most prominent periodical, *The Liberator*, in 1835. The following year, anxious to enlist southern women in the cause, she penned her most famous piece, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South.”

Grimké’s piece is unique as a historical document: we know of no other southern woman who appealed to her own kind to rise up against the slave system. But her arguments illustrate the ways that abolitionists used Christianity (including Christian ideas about women’s roles) as well as an appeal to the revolutionary rhetoric of human rights, to convince people that even though the Bible in places supports slavery, the overwhelming thrust of Christian and American duty is to the freedom of Africans.



The Bible on Slavery

“Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, **which thou shalt have**, shall be of **the heathen** that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children **of the strangers** that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, **to inherit them for a possession**; they shall be your bondmen for ever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour.” —**Leviticus 25:44–46**

“**Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling**, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” —**Ephesians 6:5–6**

“Let slaves regard their masters as worthy of all honor.” —**1 Timothy 6:1–2**

The power of these arguments was demonstrated by their effect: copies of her essay were burned publicly in South Carolina, and even the Philadelphia Quakers felt that she had gone too far.

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1

But I feel an interest in *you*, as branches of the same vine from whose root I daily draw the principle of spiritual vitality — Yes! Sisters in Christ I feel an interest in *you*, and often has the secret prayer arisen on your behalf, Lord “open thou their eyes that they may see wondrous things out of thy Law” — It is then, because I *do feel* and *do pray* for you, that I thus address you upon a subject about which of all others, perhaps you would rather not hear any thing; but, “would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly, and indeed bear with me, for I am jealous over you with godly jealousy.”

1. What images does Grimké use in this section?

2. Why does she use the word “sisters”? What effect might this have on her readers?

3. What do you think she is quoting from? Why does she think these passages will persuade her readers?

4. How does she talk about her role as a woman, and why is that important in understanding the passage?

5. Why is it so important to say that she has an interest in her readers?

6. How would you respond to this passage if you were a southern Christian female reader? What would it make you feel toward the author?

Excerpt 2

We must come back to the good old doctrine of our forefathers who declared to the world, “this self evident truth that *all* men are created equal, and that they have certain *inalienable* rights among which are, life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness.” It is even a greater absurdity to suppose a man can be legally born a slave under *our free Republican* Government, than under the petty despotisms of barbarian Africa. If then, we have no right to enslave an African, surely we can have none to enslave an American; if it is a self evident truth that *all* men every where and of every color are born equal, and have an *inalienable right to liberty*, then it is equally true that *no* man can be born a slave, and no man can ever *rightfully* be reduced to *involuntary* bondage and held as a slave, however fair may be the claim of his master or mistress through wills and title-deeds.

7. Why does Grimké invoke the Declaration of Independence? Does her use of the Declaration strengthen or weaken her argument? Why?

8. How does she argue that the nation's founding principles have more force than existing law?

Excerpt 3

I know that this doctrine of obeying *God*, rather than man, will be considered as dangerous, and heretical by many, but I am not afraid openly to avow it, because it is the doctrine of the Bible; but I would not be understood to advocate resistance to any law however oppressive, if, in obeying it, I was not obliged to commit *sin*. If for instance, there was a law, which imposed imprisonment or a fine upon me if I manumitted [freed] a slave, I would on no account resist that law, I would set the slave free, and then go to prison or pay the fine. If a law commands me to *sin I will break it*; if it calls me to *suffer*, I will let it take its course *unresistingly*. The doctrine of blind obedience and unqualified submission to *any human* power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is the doctrine of despotism, and ought to have no place among Republicans and Christians.

9. Under what circumstances does Grimké suggest that it is valid to break the law? Why?

10. What is dangerous, in her mind, about “blind obedience” to civil laws?

11. Does her use of the word “sin” change the way you think about her point? How would it be different if she had said “do something wrong” instead of “commit sin”?

12. Why do you think she mentions that both civil and church authorities should be obeyed only in certain cases? What churches might she be thinking of here?

13. Why does she refer to Republicans in the passage?

14. Are there other circumstances in which her call to resist might be dangerous? Why or why not?

15. Do you think that her mention of suffering would help her cause?

Excerpt 4

Can you not, my friends, understand the signs of the times; do you not see the sword of retributive justice hanging over the South, or are you still slumbering at your posts? — Are there no Shiphrahs, no Puahs among you, who wilt dare in Christian firmness and Christian meekness, to refuse to obey the *wicked laws* which require *woman to enslave, to degrade and to brutalize woman*? Are there no Miriams, who would rejoice to lead out the captive daughters of the Southern States to liberty and light?

16. What are the “signs of the times” that she refers to?

17. What is the “sword of justice”?

18. In what ways is Grimké’s language here more dramatic and more urgent?

19. Why does Grimké urge women to act with “Christian firmness and Christian meekness”?

20. Who are the “captive daughters”? Are they related to the “Sisters” she mentions in passage 1?

21. Who are Shiphrah, Puah, and Miriam? How would their stories relate to what Grimké is trying to say?

22. Why does she use these figures as models for southern women?

23. Why did southerners react so strongly to Grimké's piece?

24. In what ways is Grimké's "Appeal" as much a call for the liberation of women as it is a call for the liberation of the enslaved?

Glossary

civil or ecclesiastical: of the government or the church

Republicans: here referring to supporters of the American republic, not to a political party

retributive justice: justice that either rewards or punishes

Shiphrahs: Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam: women who saved Hebrew children from death ordered by the Egyptian pharaoh (Exodus, Old Testament)

Text

- Angelina Grimké, “Appeal to the Christian Women of the South,” *The Anti-Slavery Examiner*, 1836 (excerpts).

Images

- Portrait of Angelina Emily Grimké (1805–1879), wood engraving, no date recorded on caption card, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ61-1609.