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The difficulty of finding the female image in documents which are not discursive, such as the mishnaic tractate of Sotah, requires the use of other information. In the biblical texts the woman is defined by three elementary facts, which will be given briefly.

1) The woman is taken from Adam's rib and her essence is determined by her function as man's companion (Gen. 2:23-24). 2) She introduced disobedience to the garden of Eden (Gen: 3), and is therefore to be feared, because she is capable of harming the holiness of men (cf. the example of the youths in Prov. 6:25). 3) The infidelity and apostasy of Israel is defined by the image of the adulterous wife (Hos. 1:2; 2:2-4).

Against the background of these categories Scripture also gives two other elements of evaluation which testify to the viscosity of some representations and the transformation of some social structures (cf. L. Archer, 1987). On one hand, on the level of penal responsibility the Bible often imposes on women the same obligations, prohibitions and expiations which it imposes on men (for example in the areas of apostasy, incest, and damages). It narrates, on the other hand, exemplary cases: heroines and female prophets who behave in meritorious ways. Amongst these, a type which is certainly paradigmatic is Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aharon (Ex. 15:20-21). Effective examples are also the "righteous women," whose good deeds saved Israel from Egypt (cf. B. Sot. 11b).

This means that beneath the general assimilation and subjection of men and women to the same law there always remains a knot of female problems which are greatly problematic and contradictory: wisdom, courage, weakness, corruption, authority and guilty conscience. The Mishnah and above all the Talmud base themselves on this assimilation in principle and actual disparity. That is, the systematic vision of the sages was deposited on a magmatic foundation of laws and images.

The Talmud "does not in any way consider (the woman) to be inferior to the man" affirms A. Cohen (1970, 211), presenting the problem of the woman. However, immediately after he cannot avoid
quoting texts in which the female role is defined by a wide range of failings. The author refers to how the talmudic texts attribute to women vanity, greed, laziness, jealousy, and a disposition to practice witchcraft (A. Cohen, 1970, 211-214). It is undeniable that the Talmud crowns this vision with an image of frivolity and garrulity: "ten measures of speech descended into this world, and woman took nine of them" (B. Qid. 49b).

The actual creation of a woman, narrated in Genesis Rabbah (18:2) and quoted by A. Cohen, is very instructive. He relates that God asked himself from what part of the man's body he would make the woman. God decided: I will not choose the head, so that she will not be too curious; nor the ear, so she will not be too talkative, nor the heart, so she will be not too jealous; nor the hand, so she will not be too prodigal; nor the foot, so she will not continuously leave home; I will take her from a part of the body which is hidden, so that she will be modest (Cf. 1970, 212-213).

The illuminating part of the juridical framework of the Talmud is that which deals with a double rule: a) precepts which concern men above all, but which are adapted to women, and b) specific laws for women. These latter give more information and are more useful for finding female characteristics.

Schematizing as much as possible, it should be noticed that the religious precepts mentioned above are divided into prohibitions and duties. For the woman, the former are absolute. She is subjected to all prohibitions concerning marriage and sexual relations. The positive precepts are not obligatory if they depend "on the time," or if they must be undertaken at fixed times, like Sukkah or Lulab (B. Qid. 29a), because the woman is tied to domestic routine and, consequently, cannot always be available. Other duties derived in a similar way from other precepts are not obligatory either.

Among the positive precepts which are not directly applied to women, one which is opportune to remember here concerns procreation. Procreation is, in the first place, a male obligation, because the commandment given to Jacob-Israel (be fruitful and multiply, cf. Gen. 1:28; 35:11) is usually written in male terms.

Women were always kept at a distance from the cult, from service at the Temple, both because this concerned ceremonies which were recurrent and at fixed times, and because, in general, women were not qualified for services to which common people (those who were not priests) were not admitted.

On the other hand, the regulations regarding the duties of prayer and blessing are complex. Women are exempted from the Shema (B.
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Ber. 20a) at the prescribed times, and from reciting Hallel, except on Passover night (Pesah). They have to recite Amidah and after meals they must give thanks, and proclaim Qiddush on the Sabbath because it is part of the observance of the holy day (B. Ber. 20a and 20b). They are expected to recite the blessing on the Torah and, if asked, to read in public (Talmudic Enc. 1978, III:100).

At first sight this group of rules is sometimes characterized by inhibition, sometimes by concession. Studying it more carefully, it appears that, substantially, all the decisive and active faculties are addressed to men, and women are generally excluded from them. It is interesting to note a general principle: restrictions which apply to men apply even more to women, who are less protected against transgression, because they do not actively exercise any commandments.

In the area of special laws for the women, there are three precepts: the woman must calculate her menstrual cycles, that is the days on which she is unclean and forbidden; she must concern herself with the consecration of the "first fruit of the dough" (Num. 15:20), and with the lighting of candles on the Sabbath. From the talmudic point of view, the subject of the duties of women is part of the field of personal responsibilities. Extensive images of these precepts were constructed in the Jewish tradition. The first precept is probably a response to the principle of Gen. 9:6, according to which whoever "spills" the blood of others will see his or her own spilled: Eve, with the forbidden fruit, provoked the death of Adam and the woman must atone for having spilled the blood of the man. At the basis of the precept of consecration of the "first fruit of the dough" there is an analogy between the dough worked by the woman and the man made from water and earth (Gen. 2:7) (cf. Talmudic Enc. 1978, III: 111-112).

The picture would not be complete without adding that in some circumstances the destiny of a woman, who has fallen into sin, is different from that of her companion, even if in principle guilt and punishment are applied equally to the man and the woman. We can find some examples in the tractate of Sotah (3:8): a woman is not naked when she is stoned, nor is she hung after the stoning, nor is she sold for a theft, and if she is a leper she is not obliged to wear ragged clothes and have her hair dishevelled.

In situations of poverty, again, the woman is treated differently: if a man or a woman are obliged to beg, the woman is satisfied first; if two young people are orphaned, the girl will be married before the boy, because the shame that can fall on the woman is always more serious (cf. Talmudic Enc., 1978, III:109). In these examples, the woman is indeed treated with more indulgence, not only because she is more needy, but also because she shows up some of the weak points of the
system. Caution and benevolence often actually cover up a condition of danger, a fear, or the desire to avoid increasing damages (indecency, shame, or bad habits).