

HOW DID JOSEPH BECOME THE SHEPHERD OF HIS BROTHERS?

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Le bon pasteur : une métaphore parlante pour un *leadership* d'aujourd'hui ?

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Résumé de l'article

Cette lecture de l'histoire racontée aux chapitres 37-50 du livre de la Genèse se propose de retracer l'itinéraire vécu par Joseph en montrant comment il devient le berger de ses frères. C'est ainsi qu'est présenté Joseph dès le début, en anticipant les traits essentiels de ce qu'il deviendra de façon pleine et entière à la fin de l'histoire. Pour accomplir ce trajet de vie, Joseph a cependant besoin de dépasser les frontières du bercaïl dont il était responsable au début. Les péripéties à travers lesquelles ce dépassement s'accomplit incluent pour lui l'expérience de devenir victime de son propre troupeau (et de passer du statut de fils préféré de son père à celui d'esclave et de prisonnier), avant de pouvoir redevenir à nouveau le berger de ses frères, mais d'une façon nouvelle et dans un sens très différent. Ce parcours sort de l'ordinaire puisque Joseph doit traverser bien des périphéries pour finalement accéder au centre, non seulement de sa propre famille, mais encore du royaume d'Égypte. Le but de cet article est de montrer comment le tact avec lequel Joseph sait faire face à la violence peut servir de modèle à qui doit prendre soin d'autrui dans des situations éprouvantes.

HOW DID JOSEPH BECOME THE SHEPHERD OF HIS BROTHERS?

CHI AI NGUYEN

Working on the image of the shepherd in the Bible, Wénin shows that every human being must become the “shepherd of his or her own animality.”¹ For Wénin, there is a part of animality in each human being. Becoming more human does not mean eliminating the animal nature in us but humanizing it. Instead of making violence disappear and with it the dynamic of life that is essential to human growth, we need to get it under control and transform it into an element of self-realization. We are to change our numerous occasions for violence into audacious gestures of kindness. Through our self-control, animality in its violent characteristics is no longer a devouring power to be avoided, but a source of life to be developed.

For Wénin, the relationship between the shepherds and their flocks reflects the relationship between themselves and their animality.² The author establishes two different models: that of the shepherd and that of the hunter. These two models represent two different ways of dealing with violence and thus of becoming human. Shepherds do not kill their animals for food. They are not afraid of their animals because they take care of them. They do not use violence on them because they need them for their own survival (milk for example). By fulfilling their task as shepherds, they learn how to tame their own animality. They transform their tendency to violence into energy for life. As for the hunters, they kill animals for food. Their meal is made possible only through violence. They do violence to animals as if to avoid the violence that they see in them. Out of fear, they seek to show themselves more powerful and more brutal than animals in whom they recognize an uncontrollable violence. They represent those who use violence as a way to threaten anyone whom they consider to be more dangerous than themselves. They exterminate their potential enemy because they are afraid of becoming victims of cruelty.

1. The expression is of Paul Beauchamp, see André WÉNIN, *Pas seulement de pain... Violence et alliance dans la Bible* (Lectio Divina, 171), Paris, Cerf, 1998, pp. 30-31.

2. André WÉNIN, *Pas seulement de pain*, p. 103.

In the Bible, the first human being who is called a shepherd (*rō'eh*) is Abel (Gn 4:2). Joseph, like his father Jacob (Gn 30:36), is also referred to as a shepherd.³ The vocation of Joseph, however, is unique in the sense that he is the shepherd not only of the flocks, but also of his brothers. In order to accomplish his mission, Joseph first needs to go beyond the boundaries of the sheepfold for which he is responsible. Indeed, being victim of his own flock, he takes some detours (from being the favored son sent by the father to being a slave and a prisoner) before becoming the shepherd of his brothers in a new way and in a new context. His journey is extraordinary because he goes to the peripheries in order to become the center, not only of his own family but also of Egypt.

With a focus on how to handle violence⁴ and through a narrative reading of Gn 37-50, we will follow Joseph on his journey of becoming the shepherd of his brothers. We will show how Joseph can be a model for those who take care of others in a challenging situation. As the plan of our paper, we will consider 1) Joseph and the vision of being a shepherd in his family and then 2) Joseph and his preparation for the future mission, and finally 3) Joseph and the realization of his mission in Egypt. We hope that this paper might help us to deal with our own violence in order to transform it into an element of self-realization, as Wénin suggests.

1. Joseph and the vision of being a shepherd in his family

At the beginning of the story, Joseph is presented as a shepherd.⁵ It is possible to understand Joseph's mission in two different ways. He is the shepherd of the flocks: Joseph "was shepherding the flocks with [*e*l] his brothers" (37:2). Or he is the shepherd of his brothers if '*e*l is understood as the accusative rather than as the proposition⁶: Joseph "was shepherding his brothers." And so, Joseph's mission consists in being not only a shepherd of the flocks, but also a shepherd of his own brothers whose violence is known since their massacre of

3. Moses (Exod. 3:1) and David (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:34) will also do the work of a shepherd. See Victor P. HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 1-17* (New International Commentary of the O.T.), Grand Rapids MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990, p. 222.

4. Very often, preachers focus more on the image of compassionate shepherds while forgetting that they also need to use power in order to protect the group. See André COUTURE, "Réflexions d'un indianiste à propos de l'image biblique du 'Bon Pasteur,'" *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 74 (2018), p. 349.

5. Joseph whose name means "add" reminds us of Abel, the first shepherd mentioned in the Bible. When Abel is born, the narrator specifies that he is added: "Eve added (*wattosèph*) a brother to Cain" (Gn 4:2). By his name, Joseph is presented as a shepherd in the manner of Abel. Added to the sons of his father's wives, will he succeed where Abel fails? See André WÉNIN, *Joseph ou l'invention de la fraternité. Lecture narrative et anthropologique de Genèse 37-50* (Le livre et le rouleau, 21), Bruxelles, Lessius, 2005, p. 27.

6. Duane L. CHRISTENSEN, "Anticipatory Paronomasia in Jonah 3:7-8 and Genesis 37:2," *Revue Biblique*, 90 (1983), pp. 260-263.

Hamor, Shechem and all the males of the town in Gn 34. With this mission, Joseph will confront the animality of everyone, including his own, in order to become a good shepherd.⁷

To realize such a mission, Joseph needs to pass through different stages. He first becomes the least among his brothers since he is portrayed as their servant: Joseph was “a servant (*na‘ar*) with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives”⁸ (37:2). Indeed, the term *na‘ar* can be understood in two senses: a “lad” or a “servant.”⁹ This double meaning allows us to say that Joseph is at once younger than his brothers and their servant. Notice that Joseph stays with the sons of the servants, Bilhah and Zilpah, but not with the sons of Leah. It is not normal for him to do so since he is Rachel’s son. According to a Jewish tradition, in his quality as the shepherd of all his brothers, Joseph seeks to create unity between the two groups.¹⁰ In order to do so, he considers the sons of the servants as full-pledged sons.¹¹ He joins them and is even at their service. He becomes the servant of the sons of the servants. This position, however, does not last for long, at least in the understanding of others, as we will see in what happens next.

When Joseph has a dream, he does not hesitate to tell his brothers who understand it in terms of domination. They ask him: “Will you really rule over us or will you really dominate us?” (37:8) The question that the reader might ask is this: is Joseph so naive that he makes known his dream to his brothers who continue to hate him? Before giving an answer to that question, we must notice that Joseph does not give an interpretation of his own dream. He remains silent when his brothers let him know about their understanding in terms of power. This silence leads us to a paradox. On the one hand, Joseph is compelled to report his dream as if something important concerning his mission as a leader would happen in the future. On the other hand, Joseph remains silent when his brothers ask him about his intention to master over them as if he does not want to be their ruler as it is perceived by them. And so, Joseph’s account of the dream and his silence give us to understand that he will be the leader of his brothers, but not in terms of domination as they understand it. He is not as naive as we see him at first glance. He perceives something important in his future mission without fully grasping it.

7. André WÉNIN, *Pas seulement le pain*, p. 118.

8. We use our own translation to quote the Bible.

9. Victor P. HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50* (New International Commentary of the O.T.), Grand Rapids MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995, p. 403; W. Lee HUMPHREYS, *Joseph and his Family. A Literary Study* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament), Columbia SC, University of South Carolina Press, 1988, p. 34.

10. We follow the reading of André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 29.

11. The narrator presents Bilhah and Zilpah from Joseph’s perspective. They are “his father’s wives” just like Leah and Rachel. This point of view is totally different from Gn 35:22 where, in the eyes of Ruben, Bilhah is “his father’s concubine,” but not his wife. See André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 29.

At the moment his father sends him on mission, Joseph is no longer a shepherd and he is no longer with his brothers (37:12-13).¹² Thus, at first, Joseph was a worker among his brothers. But the second time, Joseph becomes the father's envoy to ensure the peace of his father's workers. Notice that the narrator mentions that Joseph's brothers go to Shechem to graze their father's sheep (37:12). Thus, at the time of Joseph's being sent on mission, it is only Joseph's brothers who work for their father as shepherds. As for Joseph, he rather assumes the task of supervising these shepherds. The change in Joseph's status thus marks a step forward in Jacob's confidence in his favorite son.

At this point, it is noteworthy that Joseph's task as mediator between his father and his brothers is sometimes judged as negative and sometimes as positive. Indeed, at the beginning of the story, Joseph tells Jacob a rumor about his brothers with a bad intention on his part: Joseph brought a "bad report about them to their father" (37:2). This action is thus perceived as evil since Joseph invents wicked words to discredit his brothers in the eyes of their father.¹³ On the other hand, when Jacob sends Joseph to his brothers, his duty as mediator is seen as positive: "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flock and bring me back word" (37:14). Paradoxically, the performance of an action that is considered positive leads Joseph to rejection and then to slavery. By contrast, after a work considered negative, although the link is not direct and the narrator does not give any details about it, Joseph is rewarded with a valuable tunic.

It is astonishing that Jacob, a man experienced in family discord, either with his brother Esau or with his uncle Laban, does not intervene in the fraternal conflict between his sons. Moreover, the fact that he sends Joseph to his brothers in a perilous situation¹⁴ does not correspond at all to the ruse he uses several times during his life. Has Jacob changed? Is he trying to persuade Joseph to become the one who directly manages fraternal conflicts? Is he showing himself in the role of the father who finally puts aside all his preferences so that the unity of the family can be established? To answer these questions, we need to look at the mission Jacob entrusts to Joseph in a broader context.¹⁵ The terms "peace" and "word" in Jacob's request ("Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flock [literally, see the peace of your

12. Nahum M. SARNA, *Genesis* (The JPS Torah Commentary), Philadelphia PA, Jewish Publication Society, 1989, p. 257.

13. Jan P. FOKKELMAN, "Genesis 37 and 38 at the Interface of Structural Analysis and Hermeneutics," in Lénart J. DE REGT et al. (eds.), *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, Assen, Van Gorcum – Eisenbrauns, 1996, p. 156.

14. Jacob thinks that his other sons are shepherding his flock in Shechem. This place should remind him of the massacre in which his sons were involved.

15. We follow André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 49.

brothers and the flock] and bring me back word” v. 14¹⁶) echo verses 2 and 4 where fraternal conflicts begin. In contrast to verse 2, where Joseph brings a wicked rumor about his brothers, Jacob here asks his favorite son to bring him a word.¹⁷ Thus, Joseph’s mission is to bring back to his father a word and not an evil rumor. Moreover, contrary to verse 4, where peace between the brothers seems impossible, Jacob now entrusts Joseph with the mission of managing peace, not only among the brothers, but also among the flocks.¹⁸ What Jacob expects from Joseph is therefore a word that brings peace among his sons. With Wénin, we can say that

Joseph’s mission is not outside the family conflict for which he and Israel are primarily responsible. On the contrary, its aim is to reverse the tendency to break up the family and to give back its chances of reaching *shalôm*. But to achieve such a goal, is it not necessary to neutralize the factor of division and hatred? Does Israel, then, need to push his beloved away from him and send him to his brothers, in the hope, perhaps confused, that with them he will form a brotherhood of which Israel will be the worthy father? Thus, Joseph does not cease to be the chosen one. Quite the opposite! But from now on, his election is invested in the conflict it has created, as if it were up to the chosen one to find a way out, by consenting to be plunged into the very heart of the crisis.¹⁹

It is in the middle of a fraternal crisis that Joseph is sent to the brothers by his father.²⁰ In seeking to join them, Joseph goes astray. What is astonishing is that he does not even know that he is lost: “a man found him and, look, he was wandering in the fields” (37:15). The reader may notice the play on words between *tō’eh*, “wanderer,” and *rō’eh*, “pastor,” the term the narrator uses to refer to Joseph’s work in verse two. In addition, the word *rō’eh* resonates with *rā’ā*, “bad,” the adjective that describes the nature of the rumor Joseph brings to his father about his brothers.²¹ Thus, through these puns, the

16. The imagery of the shepherd “is sometimes equated with an era of peace”: “The description of Jesus as the second David, and as Israel’s shepherd, begins when shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem, the city of David, heard that his son was born, and angels announcing ‘peace’ to mankind (Luke 2:8-20).” See Jack W. VANCIL, “Sheep, Shepherd,” in David N. FREEDMAN (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, New York NY, Doubleday, 1992, p. 1187-1190 (quote on 1190).

17. In relation to v. 4, the order of the terms “word” and “peace” is reversed in v. 14. This implies the reversal of Jacob’s desire. See André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 49.

18. The peace of human beings depends on the well-being of the flocks since the animals are part of family wealth. See Claus WESTERMANN, *Genesis 37-50. A Commentary*, trans. John J. SCULLION, Minneapolis MN, Augsburg Publishing House, 1986 (German 1982), p. 39.

19. André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 49. Our translation.

20. Jacob uses the word “go” twice in 37:13-14. This reminds us of Gn 12:1 where God asks Abraham to depart from his father’s land. Notice also that Joseph’s answer (“Here I am”) is similar to the response that Abraham gave to God when he was asked to sacrifice Isaac. Thus, death is at stake behind the “Here I am.” See Josy EISENBERG – Benno GROSS, *À Bible ouverte V. Un Messie nommé Joseph* (Présence du Judaïsme), Paris, Albin Michel, 1983, p. 106.

21. See Jan FOKKELMAN, “Genesis 37 and 38,” p. 157.

narrator insinuates that Joseph is a bad worker, not only when he gets lost, but perhaps also when he is shepherding his father's flock. However, although Joseph is considered a bad worker when he wanders in the fields, he makes a little progress in the brotherhood. In fact, in answering the question of the mysterious man ("What are you looking for?" [v. 15]), Joseph says to him: "It is my brothers I am looking for" [v. 16]. We can see that in this answer, Joseph shifts the interest of his interlocutor. Instead of answering on the "what" of his search, he gives the "who" of his inquiry: my brothers.²² Moreover, by saying "I" (*'ānōkī*) for the first time in the story, Joseph begins to formulate his own desire. The unusual intervention of the mysterious man thus allows Joseph to say what he really wants. Far from following his father's desire, Joseph begins to take the road that is his, even if he gets lost in the process. And so, by detaching himself from the possessive attitude of his father, Joseph begins to look for his brothers. To do so, he takes his own place as the youngest since the narrator tells us that "Joseph went after his brothers" (37:17).

When his brothers perceive Joseph from afar, they plot to kill him. They want to kill the dream-master. Here, we see that the brothers seek to eliminate the one whom they consider to be a danger for them. Indeed, as we mentioned before, when the brothers listened to Joseph's dream account, they understood it in terms of domination. Now, they want to get rid of him because they fear that his dreams might become true: "Let us kill him [...] and we shall see what is to become of his dreams." (37:20) What the brothers say to one another can be an expression of their fear, hidden deep down within them but translated into the opposite direction, namely violence. They fear Joseph's power, revealed by his dreams and try to use violence against him as a way to avoid his domination. Their behavior corresponds to that of the hunter mentioned in the introduction.

Faced with such a violence, Reuben and Judah intervene. Their plans are different from one another but have the same purpose: diminishing cruelty and saving Joseph from death. Far from participating in the murderous project of his brothers ["let us kill him (*w^enahargēhū*)"²³], Reuben seeks to discourage them: "let us not take his life" and "do not shed blood" (37:21-22). For his part, Judah suggests the idea of selling Joseph in order to avoid a blood crime. And when Joseph is sold into Egypt, the brothers kill a goat and dip Joseph's coat in its blood. They send someone to bring the bloodstained garment to Jacob who says what they want to hear: "My son's tunic! An evil beast has devoured

22. We follow the reading of André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, pp. 52-54.

23. For Adele BERLIN [*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series, 9), Sheffield, The Almond Press, 1983, p. 150], the verb "hrg" is used in the case where one kills a human being as well as in the case where one kills an animal. See Lv 20:16; Is 27:1. For Nahum SARNA (*Genesis*, p. 259), the same verb is used in Gn 4:8 to describe the fratricide of Cain.

him²⁴.” (37:33) Does Jacob easily fall into his sons’ trap? Strangely, Jacob refuses to be consoled as if Joseph is still alive. The reader wonders if Jacob discovers his sons’ involvement in Joseph’s disappearance and considers them as evil beasts who devoured their own brother.²⁵ Does the presence of a tunic and an animal remind him of his own trick a few years before when he tried to steal the blessing reserved to his brother? Be that as it may, Joseph, the shepherd of his brothers, is sent away from his own sheepfold. Will he be able to realize his mission in a new way and in a new context? Before answering that question, let us look at how Joseph prepares himself for the future mission.

2. Joseph and his preparation for the future mission

From a beloved son of his father, Joseph is brought to Egypt as a slave.²⁶ Through the presence of Joseph, everything in Potiphar’s house becomes prosperous because the Lord is with Joseph. Notice that this prosperity and its cause are perceived by the master himself.²⁷ Joseph does not say anything about God’s presence in his life as the cause of his success. When Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of his possessions, he does not worry about anything. The master’s trust is blind and Joseph makes an effort to show his integrity. When Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him, he refuses. In his first direct speech in Egypt, Joseph seeks to discourage the woman from being unfaithful. He explains to her that she is the only limit that separates him from his master. Here, we can see an echo with Gn 3. Unlike Eve who wants to abolish the distance between the Creator and his creature, Joseph seeks to preserve the difference between the master and his attendant. The logic of “everything except one” is broken by Eve but is reaffirmed by Joseph.

Joseph’s explanation is based, in the first place, on social norms. He mentions his relationship with his master as the principal motif of his refusal. He does not want to betray his master’s trust by accepting the offer of his wife. Only in second place does he talk about his religious conviction: “how could I do this great evil and give offense to God?” (Gn 39:9) Joseph’s way of explaining gives us pause for thought. He starts to mention social norms that are common between him and his master’s wife. He finishes by presenting his religious conviction that is totally different from hers since he adores the God of his fathers, not that of Egyptians.

24. Without knowing it, Jacob repeats the idea of his sons when they plotted to kill Joseph: “We will say that a wild beast devoured him.” (37:20)

25. See Patrick KIPASA MAYIFULU, “À rusé, rusé et demi. La contre-ruse de Putiphar en Genèse 39,19-21,” *Études théologiques et religieuses*, 92 (2017), pp. 661-669.

26. Joseph was the first among children of Israel who became slave, see Josy EISENBERG – Benno GROSS, *À Bible ouverte*, p. 242.

27. Patrick KIPASA MAYIFULU, *Parole, violence et ruse. Une approche narrative du début de l’histoire de Joseph (Genèse 37-39)* (Théologie biblique, 4), Zürich, Lit, 2019, p. 149.

Notice that Joseph does not want to play with evil. When Joseph does not give in to the seduction of Potiphar's wife, she continues to repeat the same invitation day after day. But Joseph refuses "to lie by her, to be with her" (Gn 39:10). We see that Potiphar's wife tries to soften the bluntness of her sexual proposition. Faced with a categorical refusal from Joseph, she adopts a new strategy "inviting Joseph merely to lie down in bed next to her"²⁸ "in the hope of making him take the first step."²⁹ But Joseph, being firm in his conviction, does not want to compromise with evil.

One day, when there is no one in the house, Potiphar's wife seizes Joseph by his garment and repeats the same invitation: "lie with me." Faced with a continual refusal, the woman does not only talk the talk, but also walks the walk. Being persistent till the end, Joseph leaves his garment in her hand and flees outside. The woman uses it as an exhibit to accuse him falsely, first in front of the servants of the house and then in the presence of her husband. For his part, Joseph remains silent. He does not seek to accuse the woman of what she has done to him. Thus, he prevents an evil action from engendering a greater one.³⁰ Indeed, accusing is often a way of making the evil action become more noxious. Accusing is providing the evildoer with a new opportunity to amplify the effect of the malice. Accusing is also ignoring that the evildoer is a miserable person in many cases. By refusing to accuse his master's wife, Joseph takes upon himself the harmful effect of her perversity and stops its spread. Moreover, for Joseph, accusing the woman is engaging in a battle which he loses in advance. After all, he is only a foreign slave who quickly becomes Potiphar's assistant. Thus, Joseph's silence is a sign of wisdom.

Is Joseph rewarded for his integrity and wisdom? When Potiphar hears his wife's complaint, he puts Joseph into the jail where the king's prisoners are kept. Without saying a word, as if to put an end to his wife's manipulation in word, he seeks to counter her trick and to mitigate the effect of violence generated by her false accusation which normally would have led to a death sentence against Joseph. By placing Joseph in prison, Potiphar saves the honor of his wife in the eyes of the servants to whom she told her story while keeping an eye on Joseph since he, as the captain of the guard, oversees the prison.³¹ And so, prison becomes a place of security for Joseph, and from there he will have an opportunity to meet with Pharaoh.

The first occasion for Joseph to get out of the prison arrives. As he interprets the dream of the chief cupbearer, he makes a request: "once it goes well

28. Robert ALTER, *Genesis. Translation and Commentary*, New York NY – London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997, p. 226.

29. Gordon J. WENHAM, *Genesis 16-50*, vol. II (World Biblical Commentary), Dallas TX, Word Books, 1994, p. 375.

30. We follow the reading of André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, pp. 116-117.

31. See Patrick KIPASA MAYIFULU, *Parole, violence et ruse*, pp. 188-189.

for you, do me the kindness, please, of mentioning me to Pharaoh, to get me released from this house” (40:14). But once freed from prison, the royal official forgets about Joseph.³² He remembers him only when Pharaoh has dreams that no one is able to interpret. By order of the king, Joseph is brought before him in new clothing as if a new chapter of his life opens. After listening to Pharaoh’s dream accounts, Joseph tells him that there will be seven years of great abundance followed up by seven years of famine. Here, Joseph can see the big picture. He also knows how to handle the coming famine and to preserve life: gathering food during the prosperous years and using it during the years of famine. Joseph’s foresight is appreciated by Pharaoh and his officials. Notice that Joseph also presents Pharaoh with some suggestions concerning personnel: “And now, let Pharaoh look out for a discerning and wise man that he may set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh do this: appoint overseers for the land.” (41:33-34) By talking about “a discerning and wise (*ḥākām*) man,” Joseph does not necessarily point to himself.³³ The use of the word *ḥākām*, however, can imply a sarcasm on the part of the narrator. Indeed, where can Pharaoh find a wise man in his country when all the wise men (*ḥākāmîm*) have failed to interpret his dreams (41:8)? Later, when Pharaoh chooses Joseph as his vizier, he will use the two words (discerning and wise) to refer to his appointee (41:39).³⁴ It is amazing that the Egyptian king recognizes the work of God’s Spirit within a Hebrew man. In the eyes of Pharaoh, Joseph’s intelligence and wisdom are the result of God’s grace. That reminds us of Potiphar who attributes the cause of Joseph’s success to the divine presence. In both cases, Joseph’s talent is viewed as the realization of God’s gift. From one house to another, a great responsibility is entrusted to him, but one thing is withheld from him: here, Pharaoh’s throne and there, Potiphar’s food (the narrator’s version) or his wife (Joseph’s version).³⁵ Thus, Joseph’s leadership, which is possible only with God’s help, is always related to a higher authority. He is accountable to his master or king.

Everything happened as Joseph had predicted. There was a great famine, not only in Egypt, but all over the earth. People from everywhere came to Egypt to procure rations. Among them were Joseph’s brothers who saw him

32. Joseph “makes no recrimination against the man who forgot his request. Rather he moves directly to the task at hand, interprets the Pharaoh’s dreams, advises him about procedure, and rises to an office of power. At each stage the focus is on Joseph’s skill as a responsible administrator. And it is his skill, his discretion and wisdom, that leads to his elevation.” George W. COATS, “The Joseph Story and Ancient Wisdom. A Reappraisal,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 35 (1973), pp. 285-297 (289).

33. We follow the reading of Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 499.

34. About close contact between the Joseph story and Wisdom literature, see Gerhard VON RAD, “The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom,” in James L. CRENSHAW (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom* (Library of Biblical Studies), New York NY, Ktav Publishing House, 1976, pp. 439-447.

35. Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 504.

as “the governor of the land” and “the provider to all the people of the land.” They approached him and “bowed down to him, their faces to the ground” (42:6). Their gestures remind us of the dreams that Joseph had, especially the one concerning sheaves. It does not mean, however, that Joseph’s dreams are realized since the brothers are only ten and Joseph does not rule over them as they imagined.³⁶ Hiding himself under the guise of an Egyptian, Joseph speaks harshly to his brothers. But he does so not because he seeks revenge on them as his tears clearly show. Rather, Joseph tries to go back to where their relationship was when they could not speak to him in a friendly way (37:4).³⁷ In order to heal the brokenness in relationships, Joseph prefers to touch it as a doctor brings the knife to the wound. It is painful but necessary for healing. In a harsh tone and with a false accusation, Joseph helps his brothers to express their difficulty in relationship. From “sons of the same man” (42:11), the brothers come to say that they are twelve brothers (42:13). And after being kept in prison for three days, a situation that reminds them of Joseph being in the cistern, the brothers confess their insensitivity to Joseph’s weeping, an attitude that was not mentioned before by the narrator.³⁸ Here, we see how Joseph is dealing with brokenness. His harsh tone and false accusation can provoke violence, but his actions have nothing to do with vengeance. By handling violence with tact, he tries to bring his brothers back to their past actions and helps them to be aware of their mistakes.³⁹ It is by recognizing their error and its consequences that the brothers can be freed from its burden.

With Joseph’s help, the brothers return to Canaan as new people. When they tell Jacob about their Egyptian stay, they try to make it seem as pleasurable as possible. They underline the human quality of the Egyptian vizier,⁴⁰ omit the mass arrest and soften Simeon’s detention.⁴¹ They clearly do so in order to prepare Jacob to let Benjamin go with them. But their modification

36. André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 140.

37. See James ACKERMAN, “Joseph, Judah and Jacob,” in Kenneth GROS LOUIS (ed.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, vol. II, Nashville TN, Abingdon Press, 1982, pp. 85-113 (here p. 90).

38. We can see how the narrator himself handles violence. If we are told in Gn 37 that the brothers did not heed to Joseph’s weeping, we would feel angry toward them. But now, as we hear their spontaneous confession of remorse, we can manifest compassion toward them. See Adele BERLIN, *Poetics and Interpretation*, pp. 49-50.

39. Later, when the brothers are about to enter Joseph’s house, they fear being punished: “It’s because of the silver pieces originally put back in our bags that we have been brought here, in order to overpower us and seize us and take us as slaves.” (43:18) The brothers think that they are punished for their theft of money. Their reasoning, however, refers to what they had done to Joseph in the past: they stripped Joseph of his coat, seized him and he ended up being a slave. See Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 549.

40. André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 171.

41. Meir STERNBERG, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative. Ideological Literature and Drama of Reading* (Indiana Study in Biblical Literature), Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 297.

of the fact also shows their transformation. Different from Gn 37 where the brothers modified the event to make their father suffer, now they do it in order to alleviate his fear.⁴² We can see the same transformation in Judah when he tries to convince Joseph to take him in place of Benjamin. Indeed, Jacob's preference for the son of Rachel was the cause of division and rejection in the past becomes now the motive for Judah to offer himself as a slave.⁴³ With such a transformation, Joseph is ready to reveal himself to his brothers and invites them to move to Egypt where he takes care of them with the love of a shepherd.

3. Joseph and the realization of his mission in Egypt

Joseph relies on the Egyptians' abomination of shepherds to ask for the best place in the host country for his father's family. Pharaoh does not refuse this request. He even rehabilitates the work of shepherds when he says to Joseph: "If you know there are capable men among them, then you shall make them overseers of my own livestock." (47:6) Thus, shepherding, abominable to the Egyptians, becomes acceptable to Pharaoh. Notice that Pharaoh could have rejected Joseph's plan to settle at Goshen, a plan that was expressed by his brothers, by stating his favorable opinion of the shepherd's trade. Indeed, to convince Pharaoh, Joseph, through his brothers, shows that shepherds are frowned upon in Egypt. Therefore, they must avoid contact with the local people by remaining in the border zone which is Goshen. And this area is actually the best place in Egypt. Joseph's request could therefore be refused if Pharaoh relies on his own opinion of shepherds. Thus, the fact that Pharaoh accepts this request by showing his esteem for the shepherds indicates great generosity and open-mindedness on the part of the king of Egypt. From this scene, we see how Pharaoh is kind and generous to Joseph's family. The king of Egypt becomes a good shepherd for an Israelite family due to the presence and leadership of the wise Joseph.⁴⁴

When his plan is accepted by Pharaoh, Joseph immediately begins to carry it out. After settling his father's family in the best land in Egypt, Joseph provides for the sustenance of all its members (47:12). However, faced with the misery of the people he governs, Joseph seeks to exchange food

42. André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 172.

43. François ROSSIER, *L'intercession entre les hommes dans la Bible hébraïque. L'intercession entre les hommes aux origines de l'intercession auprès de Dieu* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 152), Fribourg-Göttingen, Éditions Universitaires- Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996, p. 40.

44. In ancient Egypt, shepherds "did not enjoy high social esteem": "In the course of time, beginning already in the early Middle Kingdom, the image of divine shepherd begins to be joined by that of solicitous king, who was created for the sake of the people, to whom he is also responsible." Gerhard WALLIS, "Graze, Shepherd," in G. Johannes BOTTERWECK – Helmer RINGGREN – Heinz-Josef FABRY (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 13, Grand Rapids MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004, pp. 544-552 (quote on pp. 548-549). See also Jack VANCIL, "Sheep, Shepherd," p. 1188.

for money, livestock, the land and even people (47:14-20). The reader sees that in his dealings with the Egyptians, unlike his generosity toward his father's family, Joseph rigorously applies the principle of give and take. Does the Egyptian governor take advantage of the people's miserable situation to enrich himself? To answer this question adequately, the reader should note that the money Joseph collects in exchange for food is stored in the palace of the king of Egypt (47:14).⁴⁵ It should also be noted that Joseph treats the hungry people as a shepherd who takes care of his own flock since the verb *nāhal* in 47:17 is only used to refer to the guidance of the flock by a shepherd.⁴⁶ Indeed, by showing his "special solicitude,"⁴⁷ Joseph "guided them with bread (*waynah^alēm ballehem*)" (47:17).⁴⁸ Also, Joseph bought the land of Egypt on behalf of Pharaoh and not on his own account (47:20).⁴⁹ Moreover, Joseph showed himself to be a law-abiding man when he respected a decree of Pharaoh concerning land belonging to the priests (47:22). Finally, by purchasing land and men for Pharaoh, Joseph provided the Egyptians with seed so that they could sow the land. Although one-fifth of the harvest belonged to Pharaoh, the fruits of the work of the fields provided food for the people (47:23-24). The people's reaction proves that Joseph is regarded as their savior: "You have kept us alive.⁵⁰ May we find favor in the eyes of our lord and we will be slaves to Pharaoh" (47:25).⁵¹ And so, the economic measures instituted by Joseph are greatly appreciated by the Egyptians. For them, it is a favor, a salutary act during the time of famine.⁵²

Wildavsky accuses Joseph of being cruel and immoral for removing the Egyptians "town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other" (47:21). For this author, "Joseph should not have done to the Egyptians what Israelites

45. For Nahum SARNA (*Genesis*, p. 321), Joseph did not take anything for himself. See also Claus WESTERMANN, *Genesis 37-50*, p. 174.

46. See Gerhard VON RAD, *La Genèse*, trans. Étienne DE PEYER, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1968 (German 1949), p. 417. For Victor HAMILTON (*The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 614), "[t]he normal meaning of *nāhal* is 'to lead (to watering holes)' as in the familiar Ps. 23:2. The sheep will not survive if the shepherd is not able to guide them to water sources."

47. Eric I. LOWENTHAL, *The Joseph Narrative in Genesis. An Interpretation*, New York NY, Ktav Publishing House, 1973, p. 126.

48. Gerhard VON RAD, *La Genèse*, p. 417.

49. See Hermann GUNKEL, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. BIDDLE, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1997 (German 1966), pp. 443-444.

50. For Victor HAMILTON (*The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 617), the Hiphil of *hāyā* is used three times in the Joseph story (45:7, 47:25 and 50:20). In each case, it "has the meaning 'rescue, preserve alive, let live.' It is Joseph's sagacity that preserves the lives of both his brothers and the Egyptians."

51. For Benno JACOB (*The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, New York NY, Ktav Publishing House, 1974, p. 318), the Egyptians "positively thrust their enslavement upon Pharaoh as thanks for the expected food. This Joseph, the former slave, will not accept! [...] He avoids even the word 'slaves' in his reply."

52. Meredith G. KLINE, "Genesis," in Donald GUTHRIE – J. Alec MOTYER – Alan M. STIBBS (eds.), *The New Bible Commentary. Revised*, Grand Rapids MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970, p. 112.

ought not to do to one another. Why would an administrator whose own people valued residing on the same land as God-given commandment make it impossible for another people to do so?⁵³ We find a pertinent element of the answer from Alter for whom Joseph removes the Egyptians “according to the towns,” but not “into the towns.”

Despite many English versions, writes Alter, it is problematic to construe the last term as “into the town,” for it would make no sense to move all the farmers into the cities if there are to be crops in the future, unless one imagines a temporary gathering of the rural population in the towns for the distribution of food. But the Hebrew particle *le* in *le'arim* can also have the sense of “according to” – that is, Joseph rounded up rural populations in groups according to their distribution around the principal towns and resettled them elsewhere. The purpose would be to sever them from their hereditary lands and locate them on other lands that they knew were theirs to till only by the grace of Pharaoh, to whom the land now belonged.⁵⁴

Thus, the uprooting of the local population by Joseph is due to the fact that their land belongs from now on to Pharaoh. This new settlement marks a new step in the life of the Egyptians. Even though they begin a new chapter of their life, they are still together with those whom they have known before. It is on this point that we can talk about Joseph’s sense of community spirit. Indeed, everything was arranged so that “the residents who had always lived together remained together and found themselves still together with their friends but only in a fresh environment.”⁵⁵

While the Egyptians stay together, Jacob’s family members also remain among themselves. When Jacob sees Ephraim and Manasseh, he blesses Joseph through them⁵⁶ and says: “The God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, walked, the God who has shepherded me from my start to this day, the messenger delivering me from all evil, may he bless the lads, that my name be called in them, as well as the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, let them multiply exceedingly in the midst of the earth.” (48:15-16) Here in his blessing, Jacob mentions God as his shepherd.⁵⁷ “God has shepherded him and delivered him,” writes V. Hamilton. “From Rebekah’s womb to his deathbed in Egypt, Jacob testifies that God has been there with him, leading him, liberating

53. Aaron WILDAVSKY, *Assimilation versus Separation. Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel*, New Brunswick NJ – London, Transaction, 1993, p. 144.

54. Robert ALTER, *Genesis*, p. 284.

55. Samson R. HIRSCH, *The Pentateuch (Genesis, vol. 1)*, New York NY, Judaica Press, 1971², p. 624.

56. According to LXX, Jacob blessed “them [Ephraim and Manasseh]” since Gn 48:16 refers clearly to “the lads.” Whereas for MT, “he blessed Joseph.” See Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 633. In our opinion, Jacob blesses Joseph through his sons.

57. “The traditions of Israel’s life in the desert seem to have given rise to the thought of God as their shepherd, for it is during the early period that he alone is viewed as shepherd and protector.” Jack VANCIL, “Sheep, Shepherd,” p. 1189.

him.”⁵⁸ It is interesting that Jacob designates Ephraim and Manasseh as lads (*n^eārīm*), the same word is used to name Joseph (37:2; 41:12) and Benjamin (43:8; 44:22,30-34). Thus, thanks to God’s shepherding, “two lads (Joseph, Benjamin) are added two more lads (Ephraim, Manasseh)”⁵⁹ to Jacob. It is in this context that the patriarch hopes for the prosperity of his descendants.

It should be noted that Joseph receives much praise from his father in the testamentary discourse. However, this son, who has had an outstanding and faultless career, is not chosen as the ancestor of a great lineage. Worse still, the interpretation in terms of dominion about Joseph’s dream now applies to Judah⁶⁰: “Judah, it is you whom your brothers will praise, your hand will be on the neck of your enemies, and your father’s sons will bow down before you” (49:8). Compared to Judah, Joseph is in a better position to be the father of the royal line and to be the head of all the tribes. Indeed, unlike Judah, who succumbed easily to the trap set by Tamar, Joseph was able to resist the seduction of his master’s wife. Moreover, thanks to Joseph, the tribes of Israel were saved from a great famine. Does the place he occupies in the land of Egypt deprive Joseph of the privilege he deserves, especially since he is Jacob’s favorite son? This is possible but let us not forget that Joseph is considered to be the “shepherd” (*rō’eh*) of his brothers by his father himself (49:24). Thus, in his last words, Jacob confirms Joseph’s vocation as the shepherd of his brothers, a mission that the narrator announced when he introduced Joseph at the beginning of the story (37:2).⁶¹ This mission, however, does not consist in dominating others as the brothers understood it. It is all about participation in God’s plan of salvation for the whole family as Joseph gives his brothers to understand: “God sent me ahead of you to provide for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you a great surviving community.” (45:7) Is it not the function of a shepherd to walk ahead of his flock to ensure their security, life, and survival?

In his blessing, Jacob also underlines Joseph’s peaceful attitude in the face of violence⁶²: “archers savaged him, shot arrows at him and harassed him. But firm was his bow and his arms were nimble, through the hands of Jacob’s Mighty One, from there, the shepherd, the rock of Israel.” (49:23-24) In the eyes of his father, Joseph combines firmness and nimbleness to deal with grimness. Faced with adversity, Joseph succeeds in taming his aggressiveness by relying on the power of the God of his father. As readers, we can think about

58. Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 637.

59. Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 638.

60. See Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 658; Ron PIRSON, *The Lord of the Dreams. A Semantic and Literary Analysis of Genesis 37-50* (Journal for the Study of the O.T. Supplement Series, 355), London – New York NY, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, p. 129.

61. André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 303.

62. We follow the reading of André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 303.

his reaction to his brothers' malignity and the perversity of his master's wife. Only by overcoming the misfortunes of life with courage and kindness can Joseph become the shepherd of those who surround him.

Like Joseph, his brothers become more mature through the hardships of life. At the end of the story, they show their transformation through their way of dealing with violence and the possibility of vengeance. After their father's funeral, the brothers send someone to Joseph with this message: "your father had commanded before he died, saying 'Thus you shall say to Joseph: 'Please, bear your brothers' crime and their sin, for evil they have caused you.' And now, please, bear the crime of the servants of your father's God.'" (50:16-17) Hiding themselves behind their messenger, as they did before when they presented the bloodstained garment to Jacob, the brothers seek Joseph's forgiveness. In hopes of being pardoned by Joseph, they are ready to assume the responsibility of their past action by taking it at the most harmful consequence possible. Indeed, among themselves, the brothers talk about a harm (*rā'ā*) that they have done to Joseph (50:15). But in front of Joseph, and through their messenger, they use the word crime (*peša'*) to designate their past action.⁶³ Thus, the brothers anticipate Joseph's vengeance and prepare themselves to endure the most severe punishment. Their action is totally different from the past when they presented Joseph's tunic to Jacob in order to make him suffer. Rather than seeking to harm someone else, the brothers prefer to carry the burden of their fault themselves.

When Joseph hears his brothers' request, he breaks into tears. And they come to him, fall in front of him⁶⁴ and offer themselves as his slaves. By doing so, they suggest that Joseph can become equal to God if he takes for himself the servants who are God's servants. This "temptation," in the manner of the serpent in the garden of Eden, is avoided by Joseph. Thus, different from the first human beings of Genesis who seek to be like God and to take his place, the last man of Genesis refuses to replace the divine presence.⁶⁵ By asking his brothers "Am I in God's place?" (50:19), Joseph points out his limitations. Instead of seeking to abolish the dividing line between the Creator and his creature, as Eve and Adam did, Joseph shows his respect for this fundamental distinction. By doing so, he recognizes his role as God's instrument, but not as his substitute.⁶⁶

63. Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 704.

64. For André WÉNIN, *Joseph*, p. 311, this gesture sends the brothers back to Gn 37.

65. Victor HAMILTON, *The Book of Genesis. Chapters 18-50*, p. 705; Bruce T. DAHLBERG, "On Recognizing the Unity of Genesis," *Theology Digest*, 24 (1976), pp. 360-367 (here p. 363).

66. Eric LOWENTHAL, *Joseph Narrative in Genesis*, p. 156. For Jack VANCIL ("Sheep, Shepherd," p. 1189), "Israel's leaders were often regarded as shepherds" and "God was always their principal shepherd."

It is as God's representative that Joseph will provide for⁶⁷ his brothers and their little ones (50:21) as a shepherd does for his sheep.

Conclusion

Throughout our paper, we follow Joseph's journey to see how he realizes his vocation as a shepherd. This journey is not an easy one, but Joseph knows how to face the difficulties he encounters in order to accomplish his mission. It takes time for him to separate himself from his father's possessive love. With the experience of wandering and rejection, Joseph succeeds in becoming the shepherd of his own animality and accepting his own place. As the youngest, he goes after his brothers in search of them. As the assistant to Potiphar, he refuses to replace the master when his master's wife offers the possibility to him. His refusal provokes violence but Joseph knows how to handle it. Faced with the false accusation of his master's wife, Joseph does not say anything so as to prevent perversity from continuing its course of action. By doing so, he takes upon himself the harmful effect of a wicked act. It is, however, precisely through this sacrifice that Joseph makes a step forward in the realization of his mission. From prison where he unjustly serves a sentence, he has a chance to meet with Pharaoh who appoints him as vizir. With a good plan, Joseph, even during a great famine, has enough food, not only for Egypt, but also for the other countries.

Among those who come to Egypt to procure rations are Joseph's brothers. When he falsely accuses them, he does not nourish any desire for vengeance. His purpose is to help them to recognize their past error in order to assume its consequences. The confrontation with the past is painful for the brothers but it transforms them into new people. When they return to their father from their first trip to Egypt, the brothers become more attentive to their father's suffering. They present a positive account of their stay in Egypt in order to alleviate their father's suffering and fear. Certainly, the transformation of the brothers during their first trip also helps them to deal with their fear of being avenged at the end of the story. There, they are ready to assume the consequences of their past error by being willing to accept the most severe punishment. With the wisdom acquired through hardships in life and by combining firmness and nimbleness to deal with grimness, Joseph also seeks to transform the people outside his family and country. Thanks to his foresight and dedication, Joseph changes the mind of the king of Egypt who becomes very generous to the

67. Providing for a flock is one of the roles of shepherds. The other two functions are leading and protecting. See Dana M. PIKE, "Jesus, the Great Shepherd-King," in *Celebrating Easter. The 2006 BYU Easter Conference*, Thomas A. WAYMENT – Keith J. WILSON (ed.), Provo UT, Religious Studies Center – Brigham Young University, 2007, pp. 61-86. [https://rsc-legacy.byu.edu/archived/celebrating-easter/jesus-great-shepherd-king#_edn16.] Web. 11 Jan. 2020.

patriarchal family during the famine. With a sense of community spirit and a concern for survival, Joseph takes care of the Egyptians as their shepherd and savior. In all he does, Joseph is accountable to a higher authority: Potiphar, his master; Pharaoh, the Egyptian king and God. By refusing to be equal to God, Joseph recognizes his role as an instrument of the Creator. He pushes away the temptation to which the first human beings gave way. In doing so, Joseph reestablishes a new order and becomes a model for those who seek to be shepherds of others. He even foreshadows Jesus Christ, the Shepherd par excellence, who came into the world to take care of the whole of humanity.⁶⁸

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SUMMARY

Through a narrative reading of Genesis 37-50, we will follow Joseph's journey in order to show how he became the shepherd of his brothers. At the beginning of the story, Joseph is seen as someone who "was shepherding his brothers," an indication that anticipates the essential traits of his mission. In order to accomplish his mission, Joseph first needed to go beyond the boundaries of the sheepfold for which he was responsible. Indeed, being victim of his own flock, he took some detours (from being the favored son sent by the father to being a slave and a prisoner) before becoming the shepherd of his brothers in a new way and in a new context. His journey was extraordinary because he went to the peripheries in order to become the center, not only of his own family but also of Egypt. The purpose of our paper is to show how Joseph, by handling violence with tact, can be a model for those who take care of others in a challenging situation.

SOMMAIRE

Cette lecture de l'histoire racontée aux chapitres 37-50 du livre de la Genèse se propose de retracer l'itinéraire vécu par Joseph en montrant comment il devint le berger de ses frères. C'est ainsi qu'est présenté Joseph dès le début, en anticipant les traits essentiels de ce qu'il deviendra de façon pleine et entière à la fin de l'histoire. Pour accomplir ce trajet de vie, Joseph a cependant besoin de dépasser les frontières du bercaïl dont il était responsable au début. Les péripéties à travers lesquelles ce dépassement s'accomplit incluent pour lui l'expérience de devenir victime de son propre troupeau (et de passer du statut de fils préféré de son père à celui d'esclave et de prisonnier), avant de pouvoir

68. On the figure of Joseph as the prototype of Christ, see Martine DULAËY, "Joseph le patriarche, figure du Christ," *Cahiers de Biblia Patristica*, 2 (1989), pp. 83-105; Aubrey W. ARGYLE, "Joseph the Patriarch in Patristic teaching," *The Expository Times*, 67 (1956), pp. 199-201.

redevenir à nouveau le berger de ses frères, mais d'une façon nouvelle et dans un sens très différent. Ce parcours sort de l'ordinaire puisque Joseph doit traverser bien des périphéries pour finalement accéder au centre, non seulement de sa propre famille, mais encore du royaume d'Égypte. Le but de cet article est de montrer comment le tact avec lequel Joseph sait faire face à la violence peut servir de modèle à qui doit prendre soin d'autrui dans des situations éprouvantes.