

THE FOXES THAT RUIN THE VINEYARDS —
A LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF
SONG OF SONGS 2:15

Catch the foxes instead of us, the little foxes that ruin the vine-
yards, our vineyards that are in blossom.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a literal interpretation of *Song of Songs* 2:15. Initially, this verse is identified as an independent unit, as a song intended to scare off. Now it forms part of a garden/countryside scenery (2:8-17). In 2:15 the co-workers of the lover are addressed. They are asked to create an intimate mood by setting the lover free from his work, and to catch the foxes instead of him.

1. METHODOLOGY

In the past *Song of Songs* was interpreted by means of allegorical references to the church and the people of Israel,² whereas at present literal interpretations prevail. Even if metaphors have been widely used in allegorical interpretations they should not generally be rejected. The studies by Keel (1984) and Müller (1984a), in particular, have revealed a multitude of metaphors as a stylistic means for literal interpretations. No distinction can be drawn between the description of nature and a metaphorical meaning (Keel 1986:99). This overlap is typical for the experience of love and sexual attraction. The senses are out of control and lack the ability to distinguish clearly.

No agreement has been reached concerning the structure of the book which has been portrayed as something between a mere anthology and a highly sophisticated composition (Riekert 1983:196). However, keywords and refrains indicate that smaller units are linked to each other. Taking this into consideration, 2:15 will be placed in the context of the book, especially in its narrower context of 2:8-17. This is based on the assumption that the poems, even if they were originally independent units, create a meaning as

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2 See (Köpf 1986:508-513) for Christian interpretations and Kuhn (1986:503-508) for Jewish interpretations.

a whole, in particular if this is done purposely. The keywords “vineyard” and “fox” are evaluated for their significance in the verse and their potential metaphorical meanings.

2. THE KEYWORDS “VINEYARD” AND “FOX”

2.1 Vineyard

2.1.1 “Vineyard” in Song of Songs

In *Song of Songs* the vineyard theme occurs in 1:6,14; 2:15; 6:11; 7:13 (English 7:12) and 8:11-13. The vineyard is described as an orchard of mixed fruits, not as a single culture.³ Grape and figs besides other fruit grow in the vineyard. An orchard of nuttrees (6:9) may have pomegranates and vines, and a vineyard may have pomegranates (7:13) and henna blossoms (1:14). No distinction can thus be drawn between vineyard and orchard.

The vineyard theme is part of the garden theme. In *Song of Songs* the garden theme occurs literally and symbolically, literally as a place of love-making (2:10-15; 7:11-13), and symbolically as a term for the beloved woman (4:12). The distinction is not always clear (6:2). Therefore, the vineyard theme also has a metaphorical meaning.

The vineyard theme frames the book. In 1:6 the lady states that she did not keep her own vineyard. This statement is emphasised by the use of the double determination “my vineyard, which is mine”. Similarly, in 8:12, greater emphasis is placed on “my vineyard, which is mine before me”. This contrasts these vineyards with those of Solomon (Murphy 1979:438). In 1:6 she moans about her situation. She has turned gloomy because her brothers made her keep their vineyard. Subsequent to this, she is woeful in that she did not keep her own vineyard. She was not allowed to do any tasks except those given to her by her brothers. In this case the last stanza is linked with “even” — “even my own vineyard I have not kept”.⁴ She may drop veiled hints to herself, namely that she lost her virginity. Taking the preceding stanza into account, it may be stated that her brothers made her guardian of chastity.

3 This contrasts the law of separation (Deut. 22:9; cf. Lev. 19:19) and has been solved by Jewish interpreters who understood it as a prohibition for grain only (Dalman 1935:328).

4 Another but less likely possibility is that her brothers have been angry with her because she did not keep her vineyard.

Such an interpretation becomes more evident as the story progresses. In 8:12 it appears still hidden but becomes more evident as a metaphor of the woman. The figure 1000 alludes to Solomon's thousand women (1 Kgs 11:3) who are opposed to the single vineyard, the lover's beloved woman (Fox 1985:174). She is his vineyard.

In 1:14 her beloved is compared to "a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En Gedi". The vineyards of En Gedi are a famous oasis with a warm climate (Dalman 1935:321), from which these henna blossoms originate. This is more specific than 7:12, where henna is found in the countryside (7:12). The vineyards of En Gedi function as an allusion to wellness and desire.⁵

In 7:11-13 two places for love-making are mentioned, namely the open countryside (7:11-12) and the vineyards (7:13). This runs parallel to 2:11-14 (open field) and 2:15 (the vineyard). The two paragraphs differ as to the time of love-making. In 7:12, 13 the time of love-making is in the early morning when the two lovers go for a stroll. In 2:11-15 love-making occurs in the daytime. The lover had been working in the garden and is waiting for his beloved to arrive. Walk and work are cheap excuses for the real intention of love-making and hide the lovers' real intention in an obvious manner.

A gardener has two tasks, namely to protect the plants against the foxes (2:15) and to look after the buds (7:13). In 7:12, 13 the two lovers discuss going to the vineyards to look after the growth of the plants:

Let us go out early to the vineyards, and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom.

The cohortative "Let us go out" (7:13a) presents an excuse similar to the one in 2:15 regarding the care for the plants of the vineyard. In contrast to 2:15 the lover gives his real motive: "There, I will give you my love" (7:13b).

To sum up, it can be stated that the vineyard theme in *Song of Songs* is not limited to a literal level. It can even include a reference to the woman as the vineyard. In 2:15 the vineyard is not only a working-place but also a place for love-making. Thus, this verse toys with the indifference between a literal and metaphorical meaning, but it is not identified with the woman. There is no reason to extend the vineyard-woman metaphor to the entire book (against Müller 1984a:40; Krinetzki 1980:13). This would be problematic as it would also require a metaphorical meaning for the foxes.

5 The frequent vineyard metaphor throughout the book is no reason to postulate also here a "hidden or implicit reference to herself" (Murphy 1979:438).

2.1.2 “Vineyard” beyond *Song of Songs*

The term “vineyard” is mostly used in a literal sense and has the positive connotation of a peaceful world (1 Kgs 5:5; Jer. 31:5). The relationship between Israel and God is often compared to a vineyard, Yahweh being the keeper of the vineyard (Jer. 12:10; Is. 3:14; 5:1-10; 27:2-3). Isaiah 5 is also an excellent example of a song dealing with love in the context of a vineyard.

As there is no direct reference to the nation of Israel in *Song of Songs*, there is no reason to assume an allegorical one but it explains why *Song of Songs* was interpreted later as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel.

Psalm 128:3 compares the vine, not the vineyard, to the fertility of a woman. This is the closest metaphorical link of the identification of the vineyard with the woman in *Song of Songs*. The metaphorical identification of vineyard and woman is found in an Ancient Near Eastern source,⁶ which identifies the woman with field and soil.⁷ The point of comparison seems to be the planting of the seed and fertility. This limits the wide field of interpretation for the vineyard motif, which is often extended to different aspects of the woman, namely her body, virginity, purity, attractiveness, or fertility.

2.1.3 Conclusions for understanding “vineyard” in *Song of Songs*

Since the vineyard motif in the Old Testament is generally used in a literal sense except when referring to Israel, it does not support a different interpretation. However, the book itself suggests a metaphorical interpretation of the vineyard as the woman, and this has some support from Psalm 128:3 as well as from Ancient Near Eastern sources.

In 2:15 the woman is one of the speakers,⁸ but she does not refer to herself. Consequently, vineyard and woman cannot be identified with each other. In 2:15 the vineyard is an actual vineyard, functioning as the place of love-making, where the woman can give herself. Metaphorical aspects are not obvious.

6 KTU I, 24.22-23, according to Müller's interpretation (1984b:339).

7 This is common even in modern Arabic. Vollers (1904:236) knows that a single young lady is called “Brachland” (fallow land).

8 There is no reason to suppose that she is the only one speaking.

2.2 Fox

2.2.1 “Fox” in *Song of Songs*

2:15 is the only verse in *Song of Songs* that mentions foxes. The article is missing, probably for poetic reasons (Delitzsch 1875:51) but the nouns are still determined because of the relative sentence in 2:15c.

The fox cannot be distinguished clearly from the jackal (Mulder 1993: 1191). Foxes are destructive. Some commentators assume that foxes go underground and destroy the roots. Others emphasise that young foxes, in particular, destroy vineyards by gnawing on the buds and branches of the vineyard. This is known from Greek poetry:

Two foxes lurk nearby; one prowls down the vine rows, stealing the ripe fruit, while the other pits all her cunning against the boy's satchel (Theocritus, *Idylls* 1, 48-50).

I hate the thick-tailed vixens which come at evening to Micon's vineyard and strip all its fruit away (Theocritus, *Idylls* V, 111-112).

Does the fact that the foxes are young have any significance? The vineyards are in blossom and the foxes are young. This continues the springtime theme (2:11-14). Some commentators are of the opinion that young foxes are mentioned because they are easier to catch. They are not cautious. If this were true, this cannot be the main reason, because the text is focusing on their effect, namely the destruction of the vineyards. The destruction caused by the foxes is the reason for sending a group to catch them.

2.2.2 Foxes beyond *Song of Songs*

The fox occurs in Judges 16:4; Ezekiel 13:4; Psalm 63:11, Lamentations 5:18 and Nehemiah 3:35 (English 4:3). In the Samson story the imagery of fox and vineyard appears in the context of a wedding. Samson sets fire to the fields and vineyards of the Philistines by releasing foxes in the fields and vineyards to avenge himself against those who have destroyed his marriage (Jdg. 15:4-5). Ezekiel 13:4 compares Israel's prophets with foxes among ruins. In Psalm 63:10,11 the enemies of the faithful shall be prey for jackals. In Nehemiah 3:35 it is part of a mockery of Tobiah the Ammonite, an enemy who disregards the work of the returnees who rebuilt the wall. Here the fox represents a little harmful force. Similarly, in Lamentations 5:18 the foxes prowling over the desolate Jerusalem illustrate her destruction.

In 2:15 foxes have a negative connotation of destruction. They are a little harmful force. There is nothing positive in them.

In the Egyptian love songs a young fox or a similar animal can imply a young lover. The woman states: "He is the love-wolf" (fragment DM 1038 verso translation in Fox 1985:78). She may use the term as a term of endearment:

My heart is not yet done with your love-making, my little jackal.
Your liquor is your love-making (Papyrus Harris 500 song 4; translation of Fox 1985:10).

In both instances the sexual connotation is obvious and even visible by the phallus determinative, determining the kind of love mentioned. A similar case is *ostraca* with drawings of foxes (pictures in Keel 1986:105). Fox tales are common in Assyria where the fox appears as a cunning animal (Ebeling 1971:1), likewise in Greek literature from the 5th century BC onwards, especially in comedy (Hünemörder 1998:687).

In *Idylls* I, 48-50 and V, 112-13, Theocrit (275 BC) knows the fox as a destroyer of vineyards; he even eats grapes.

2.2.3 Conclusions for understanding "fox" in *Song of Songs*

Generally the fox shows a great deal of cunning. The comparison of the fox with a group of people is found in Ezekiel 13:4. In Egyptian love-songs fox and lover are directly compared in a definite sexual context. The term is used as a term of endearment. This differs from 2:15 where the term *fox* is used negatively for the animal disturbing a vineyard. The fox is not praised as the beloved one is. There is no direct reference to sexuality. The foxes should therefore not be identified with young men (e.g. Mariaselvam 1988: 205), who agree with the lover. Such identification is based on the unfounded extension of the vineyard-woman metaphor to a love relationship with rivals. Most likely the foxes are meant literally, the repetitive specification of young foxes is used for poetic reasons.

2.3 "Vineyard" and "fox"

The work to be done is to catch foxes that are ruining the vineyards. The vineyard is repeated for poetic reasons and specified as being in blossom. A blossoming vineyard is especially threatened. This intensification expresses the urgency of the work. "Vineyard" is used in the plural. This may emphasise the immense work to be done but could also be insignificant, as vineyard is often used in the plural.

The usage of vineyard as a metaphor in verses 1:6 and 8:12 raises the question whether the vineyard, and the fox, may be used metaphorically in

2:15. In a metaphorical interpretation the foxes refer to those who are intruding the vineyard, namely young men but not the lover himself. The foxes are young because the boys who are after the young ones are young. They imply any force harming the ladies' feminine charm or the blossoming love.⁹ The little foxes dig under the grapes and destroy their roots as young boys destroy a virgin's chastity. They are two-legged foxes (Von Reuß 1893:365).¹⁰

In a metaphorical interpretation the vineyard refers either to the young lady or to a third group of young ladies.

1. An interpretation that identifies the vineyard with the lady assumes that the catching of the foxes would protect the woman. The lover wants to get rid of intruders, so that the two can be left undisturbed. They ask to keep these admirers away because they want to be on their own (Krinetzki 1980:13).
2. Identifying the vineyard with young women gives a surprising twist to the verse, creating a double meaning (Würthwein 1969:46). The literal meaning of the verse would be: the young women warn of the "danger" of the devastation of the vineyards (themselves) as the "little foxes" (young men) are on the prowl, but they are in fact inviting them (Krinetzki 1964:133). When they say, "our vineyards" are in bloom, they are referring to their own sexual desire and activity. R. Abraham b. Isaac ha-Levi TaMaKh stated:

As the young man turned to chase the foxes, the maiden called to the hunters, asking them to seize them (Feldman 1970:91).

3. Murphy (1990:140) and Loretz (1971:19), who accept a double meaning, interpret the verse as part of a scene between the woman and the man replying to verse 2:14. This can be considered a tease. The lover had called for her, longing to see her and hear her voice (2:14). Now she answers his request by singing a ditty song, retaining the second person plural address. If we follow this train of thought, she is saying that she is not as inaccessible as a dove. "There are always little foxes

⁹ I did not find an interpretation identifying the fox with the lover.

¹⁰ When explaining this to my students at Morija Theological Seminary in Lesotho, they quoted a Sesotho proverb: "Ha ngoetsi e fihla ntata mohlankana o lokela no tsoara linokoane." (When the daughter-in-law arrives, the father-in-law catches those who go underground to steal). This is interpreted as an old custom, namely, that the father-in-law finds out by sleeping with his new daughter-in-law if she has had an intimate relationship with someone, that is a young man, who is a robber of her virginity.

that devastate the vineyards, young swain who laid siege to young women” (Murphy 1990:140).

An interpretation that identifies the vineyards with young women is based on the plural of vineyards but in *Song of Songs* the plural of vineyard is not used to signify young women. There is no hint of a tease. In 1:6 the lady reported that she did not keep her vineyard. Could foxes have been the reason for her failure? There is no link between these verses besides the key-word “vineyard”. This is not a basis for such an interpretation.

The identification of the foxes with young men is not substantiated in *Song of Songs*. It is either based on the assumption of a feast in the vineyard with “Brautraubspielen” (games about the abduction of the bride; Krinetzki 1964:134), or on a drama theory which identifies an act throughout the book including other people besides the beloved and the lover. Any interpretation based on this identification fails if the main point of the literal interpretation is borne in mind: the intention is to get rid of the foxes, most likely by disturbing or killing them. Having excluded non-literal interpretations, a literal interpretation must be accepted when we consider the verse in its context and interpret it as such.

3. LITERAL INTERPRETATION

3.1 Context

2:15 is part of the unit 2:8-17 and is uttered in the context of longing for a meeting between the lover and his beloved. Here the beloved woman speaks. She longs for the appearance of the lover (2:8-9), replays his words (2:10-15), and dreams about a *rendezvous* (2:16-17).

In the replay of verse 2:10-15 the two switch roles because she imagines his longing for her. He is longing for and seeking her (2:11-14) until she arrives. He is calling her (2:13), compares her to a hidden dove (2:14), and praises her beauty. By making him speak she creates a natural romantic scene on the field (2:11-14) and in the vineyard (2:15).

2:15 is linked to the preceding verses by the springtime theme of budding plants, including vines (2:12,13), and a landscape with clefts of the rock and recesses of the cliff, where not only the dove but also the fox are at home (Delitzsch 1875:51). The trees are blossoming and the vine is budding. It is a time of joy and singing.¹¹

11 וַיִּשְׂרַח in 2:12 refers to singing (Keel 1986:98) and not to pruning (Dalman 1935:330).

In 2:14 he is addressing her as his dove (cf. 5:2; 6:9). Earlier he had compared her eyes to a dove's eyes (1:15), but now her whole person is compared to a dove and a possessive suffix is added: "my dove". This shows the strengthening of the tender ties of their relationship, but his yearning for her is not yet fulfilled because she is unreachable like a dove in the clefts of the rock. His desire to see and hear her will only be fulfilled when the two are united. This is the case in 2:15 as the plural indicates: "Catch the foxes instead of us". The plural refers to the lover and the beloved¹² as is the case in other instances of a sudden change of speaker (1:4).¹³ She imagines that her lover has arrived so that they can make love (2:16-17).

The sequence of thought could continue from the longing (2:14) to the meeting (2:16) of the lovers. This supports the view that 2:15 is originally an independent unit with its own message belonging to the theme of hunting. Herder (1778:30) calls it a "Scheuchlied" (a song of scaring off). This has no sexual connotations but deals with the scaring off of foxes because of their destructive activities in a vineyard. This does not seem to make sense in the love poems of *Song of Songs* but it has a specific function in its narrow context 2:8-17. The fulfilment of the loving unification demands to be undisturbed. When the lovers unite their love, it is in danger of being interrupted before it is fulfilled (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). If it is read as an integral part of this unit, the lovers¹⁴ are asking a third group to allow them to have undisturbed intimacy.¹⁵

3.2 Analysis of the verse

The addressee is requested, or rather ordered, as the imperative suggests, to catch the little foxes "for us". Here the lamed *dativum* expresses a (trans-) action which one group or person is doing for another.¹⁶

- 12 Exum (1973:55,58) does not take this into account when she eliminates the lover as the speaker of this verse, arguing that 2:14 forms a fitting conclusion to his speech.
- 13 Krinetzki (1964:133) explains the plural as the bride and her companions but bases this on an identification of the vineyard with the woman.
- 14 This is more plausible than assuming a third speaker or the woman alone, answering and interrupting the lover's request (Graetz 1871:144; Bekkenkamp 2000:88).
- 15 Weems (1997:393) correctly realises that the lovers "avoid detection by others" but does not account for the addressee. She assumes that foxes and vineyard allude to the cunning stratagems of the lovers. This interpretation is forced.
- 16 Among the approximately three hundred references there are about twenty-five referring to a transaction of things or animals with people. Jenni (2000:99-

The same pattern is used in Leviticus 14:4 and Deuteronomy 1:22. These references are important because they include the idea of representation. In Leviticus 14:4 animals instead of the sinner are sacrificed, and in Deuteronomy 1:22 a group of spies is exploring the country not only for the people but also instead of the people. Similarly the lover and her beloved ask to catch the foxes not only “for” them but “instead of” them. “To catch the foxes for them” implies a transaction which the speaker would expect the foxes to receive. Catching the foxes “instead of them” points to deputyship. They do not only ensure the lovers’ intimacy when they are left alone but they also guarantee that they will not be disturbed when they are not doing the work. They deputise on behalf of them, securing their bit of foul play which will come to a natural end “when the day breathes and the shadows flee” (2:17).¹⁷

Is it possible to identify those who are ordered to catch the foxes? They are not identified in 2:15. Hence, the original *Scheuchlied* leaves this question open. However, its new, secondary place in *Song of Songs* may indicate a group.

1. Could it be the friends of the woman (Krinetzki 1980:13), in particular the daughters of Jerusalem? Throughout the book the daughters of Jerusalem are close to the woman. They appear a few times in intimate situations as protectors of the intimacy (2:7; 3:5,11; 5:16-6:1). Since the lover and the beloved are now united it could be assumed that they have come with her. Asking them to take over the task of catching the foxes would presume that they are taking over a new task instead of proceeding with it. This does not match the idea of substitution, namely that they are catching the foxes instead of them. It would shift the emphasis from the help of the group guaranteeing privacy and intimacy to getting rid of them. They would not be helpers but intruders. This undertone would be strange to their appearance in the remainder of the book. It can be concluded that the daughters of Jerusalem are not addressed here.

101) lists them as PDP (person-thing/abstract-person) and PTP (person-animal-person).

- 17 Commentators differ on the issue if this is at the end of the day or at the end of the night. In a marriage song Theocrit creates similar scenery with a natural end of a time of sexual pleasure and the return of people:

Sleep now, breast pillowed upon breast, while your breast mingles together love and desire. But do not forget to wake before the dawn; for when day breaks, at the time when the cock first lifts his handsome feathered neck to crow, we shall be here again. (Theocritus, *Idylls* XXI, 53-57).

2. Could it be a group from the sphere of the lover? The lover appears in different fictional roles. Most prominent are the king (1:4) and the shepherd (1:7). Whenever they meet they are not alone from the outset. To be alone is not self-evident for the lovers but something they are longing for. The king meets her in public. They have to run into the privacy of his chamber (1:4). The shepherd is with his colleagues (1:8), and she is protected by the sons of her mother, that is her brothers or step-brothers (1:6).¹⁸ Young men are the fellows of the lover (2:3). If in the other fictional roles the lady meets her lover when they are not alone yet, it may be assumed that this instance is similar.

Unit 2:8-17 is linked to 6:2-3 by the identity of 2:16 and 6:3 and the imagery of garden/countryside. As the lover appears in 6:2 as a gardener he may do so in 2:15. In this instance his co-workers, who have been working with him in the vineyard, may be addressed. Within the different fictions the groups play different roles in the context of love-making, but they are not identical. Hence, it may be concluded that the people addressed in 2:15 cannot be identified elsewhere. They are a literal figure limited to this verse, supporting the original independence of this verse, creating a secondary impression of continuity.

The situation is as follows: the vineyard, related to the theme of love-making, is a place of love-making. The foxes are disturbing. Two people who meet in the vineyard are taking some time off for their own pleasure. As the daughters of Jerusalem (2:7; 3:5; 8:4) had been addressed to ensure no disturbance, another group, probably the co-workers, are asked to ensure the same. Such a situation of undisturbed intimacy is common throughout *Song of Songs* and is highly valued and protected. The co-workers are asked to catch the foxes instead of the lovers so that they may remain undisturbed. This sets the lovers free for turning to each other. They reach their goal since she states: "My friend is mine and I am his" (2:16).

18 The brothers take on a negative function as the foxes do.

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Literal interpretation

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