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ANIMALS AND SEXUALITY IN THE SONG OF SONGS

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ABBREVIATIONS

Akk.	Akkadian
ANE	ancient Near East(ern)
ANET	Pritchard, James B., ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.
Aram.	Aram.
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
BHS	Elliger, K., and W. Rudolph, eds. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia.* Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983.
CDCH	Clines, David J. A., ed. *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2009.
Const. ap.	Constitutiones apostolicae
DCH	Clines, David J. A., ed. *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993–2016.
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by Emil Kautzsch. Translated by Arther E. Cowley. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1910.
In Cant.	Hippolytus, *In Canticum canticorum*
LXX	Septuagint
Paed.	Clement of Alexandria, *Paedogogus*
PG	Migne, J.-P., ed. Patrologia Graeca. 161 vols. Paris, 1857–1886.
Spec.	Philo, *De specialibus legibus*
Syr.	Syriac
Vulg.	Vulgate

ABSTRACT

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As ecological and animal hermeneutics have contributed much to the field of biblical studies recently, less attention has been paid to the Song of Songs. This dissertation examines the nonhuman animal imagery of the Song alongside both biblical scholarship and animal studies. It argues that the Song presents human sexuality as a part of nonhuman animal sexuality, a shared field of experience rather than a superior human domain over an inferior animal domain. In addition, this common experience of sexuality across human and nonhuman animals has the effect of blurring the lines between species, making it unclear where the human ends and the animal begins. The dissertation works through the Song's animals group by group, beginning with wild herbivores, then domesticated herbivores, then predatory mammals, and finally birds, showing how the love poetry of the Song can be read in ways that question the human/animal binary. It concludes by reflecting that if the lovers of the Song can so value one another, perhaps also the nonhuman animals they use to represent one another deserve ethical consideration.

You and me, baby, ain't nothing but mammals,
So let's do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.

—Bloodhound Gang, "The Bad Touch"

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Animal Imagery in Human Love Poetry and Beyond

Most modern interpreters of the Song of Songs, according to Roland Boer, identify its topic as "love and/or sex between human beings."[1] Indeed, many times commentators explicitly state the precise *species* that the poem intends to speak about: Richard M. Davidson sees it as a "whole book taken up with celebrating the wholesome beauty and enjoyment of human sexual love!"[2] David J. A. Clines confidently proclaims that there is "one thing that it is self-evidently about: human sexual love."[3] Nicholas Ayo uses the phrase "human sexuality" a full sixteen times in his commentary.[4] For Roland Murphy, "the obvious meaning of the Song is human love,"[5] and Michael Fishbane asserts that "the Song's arch-theme is *human love and desire*."[6] While at a very basic level I agree

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[1] Roland Boer, "Making It, Literally: Metaphor, Economy, and the Sensuality of Nature," in *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity, and Carnality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 38.

[2] Richard M. Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs: Return to Eden," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 27 (1989): 1–19, here 19.

[3] David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?", in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 201 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 110.

[4] Nicholas Ayo, *Sacred Marriage: The Wisdom of the Song of Songs* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

[5] Roland E. Murphy, "Song of Songs," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Berard L. Marthaler, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2002), 319.

[6] Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1d989qb, 18, italics original.

with claims like these (the poems' main characters are of course humans), I can't help but wonder why this collection of poetry, ostensibly focused on love between human animals, so often uses language and imagery that invoke nonhuman animals. Why, for instance, would the human speaker in Song 2:8–9 express delight in her human sexual partner by commanding him to act like a gazelle or deer? Why imagine her beloved as a different species? If this poem is so obviously "about" human eroticism, why does its imagery stray so far from the human? Why celebrate a human by naming a nonhuman? In short, could the poem be "about" something more *animal*?

Critics' reactions to the Song's animal imagery take a couple forms. Some have indeed noted the oddness of some of the Song's imagery, especially for modern Western ears. Duane Garrett remarks on 1:9, "To a modern reader, it is somewhat bewildering that the man would compare his beloved to a horse."[7] At other times, they may react differently and take these comparisons as acceptable and unobjectionable: "When one thinks of a dove, one thinks of soft cooing, fluttering wings, gentleness, and in the case of the white dove, brightness of color" (spoken of 1:15).[8] In either case, the feature of a poetic description that commentators find off-putting is the poet's *choice* of animal comparison rather than the *idea* of an animal comparison per se. Horses might seem unflattering and doves complimentary, but the presence of animal imagery in general in human erotic poetry is widely accepted and unremarkable. How could this be?

On the one hand, perhaps this broad acceptance should not surprise us. Human

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[7] Duane A. Garrett, "The Song of Songs," in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 144.

[8] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 148.

authors and characters use animal imagery to refer to one another in the love literature of other cultures and times as well. For instance, Michael Fox notes many sexual uses of animal imagery in ancient Egyptian literature. One lover tells her beloved, "My heart is not yet done with your lovemaking, / my (little) wolf cub!" (Papyrus Harris 500, Group A, No. 4).[9] Mesopotamian potency incantations are replete with imagery of donkeys ("Let the ass swell up! Let him mount the jenny!" [KAR 236, line 3]), horses ("Let a horse [make love to me(?)!]" [STT 280 iv, line 16]), deer ("With the love-making of a stag seven times, / Make love to me!" [text no. 9, p. 26, lines 4–8]), and other animals.[10] The Roman playwright Plautus records love talk that includes "my little sparrow, my dove, my hare" (*mea uita, mea mellilla, mea festiuitas* [*Casina* 1.135]).

The trend does not stop in antiquity. Geoffrey Chaucer's Alisoun, the beautiful wife of the carpenter, can frolic "[a]s any kyde or calf folwynge his dame," and she is called a "joly colt" (*The Miller's Tale* 3259–63; cf. Song 4:1–2; 6:5–6; 1:9). William Shakespeare's Falstaff and Mrs. Ford exchange cervid erotic imagery ("Who comes here? My doe?" […] "Sir John? Art thou there, me deer, my male deer?"), leading up to the former suggesting that the latter and Mrs. Page "[d]ivide me like a bribed buck, each a haunch" (*The Merry Wives of Windsor* 5.5.15–23; cf. Song 2:8–9, 16–17; 8:14). Likewise, Demetrius describes his sexual pursuits as a "hunt" for a "dainty doe" (*Titus Andronicus* 2.2.25–26). Most provocatively, in a passage in his *Venus and Adonis* that

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[9] Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 10. See pp. 3–81 for his complete discussion of Egyptian parallels with the Song.

[10] Robert D. Biggs, ed., *ŠÀ.ZI.GA: Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations* Texts from Cuneiform Sources 2 (Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1967), 33, 21, and 36, respectively.

may actually draw on Song of Songs,[11] Venus proclaims to her lover, “I’ll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer” (line 231). She invites him to “[f]eed where thou wilt” and even to “[s]tray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie” (lines 232–234).[12]

The twentieth-century Dutch writer Gerard Reve referred to his two lovers as “Little Tiger” (*Teigetje*) and “Water-Vole” (*Woelrat*), and they wrote a book about their life together under those names.[13] Lovers today may use pet (!) names for one another, such as “tiger” or “snuggle bunny.” Queer men may classify one another as bears, wolves, and otters,[14] and anyone who possesses a penis will likely find “hung like a horse” a compliment. The rapper Snoop Dogg pictures himself in the song “Doggystyle” as a canine (“a famous dog”) seeking “pussy.”[15] Of all of these examples, the reader might perhaps be surprised by the individual *choices* of animal imagery appearing in a discussion of sexual or romantic love, but the basic *idea* of using imagery such as this in the first place is, as in interpretation of the Song, relatively unremarkable, even commonplace.

On the other hand, perhaps the Song’s erotic animal imagery *should* surprise us. Frequently, animal comparisons in the context of love and sex are meant not to be

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[11] Camilla Caporicci, “A Reference to the Song of Songs in Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis (229–240),” *Notes and Queries* 65 (2018): 50–51, https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjx187.

[12] For more animal imagery that might draw on the Song, see Noam Flinker, *The Song of Songs in English Renaissance Literature: Kisses of Their Mouths*, Studies in Renaissance Literature 3 (Woodbridge, U.K.: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 88–99.

[13] Teigetje and Woelrat, *Ons leven met Reve* [*Our Life with Reve*] (Amsterdam: Balans, 2012). Thanks to Marco Derks for this reference.

[14] George Mazzei, “Who’s Who in the Zoo? A Glossary of Gay Animals,” *The Advocate* (26 July 1979): 42–43 records a gay “zoo” inhabited by a surprising number of creatures.

[15] “Doggystyle,” featuring George Clinton and Jewell, track 2 on Snoop Dogg, *Death Row: The Lost Sessions vol. 1*, WIDEawake Entertainment, 2009.

complimentary but rather insulting and even oppressive, often drawing on most cultures' taboo on bestiality.[16] For instance, the prophet Jeremiah accuses his audience of being "an onager" (i.e., a wild donkey) who sniffs the wind "in heat" (Jer 2:24)[17] and "well-fed, large-testicled stallions" who lust after their neighbor's wives (Jer 5:8; cf. 13:27),[18] and Ezekiel disparages the allegedly donkey-sized penises of the Egyptians and their equine emissions (Ezek 23:20).[19] Likewise, Hosea 8:9 depicts Ephraim as a "lone onager" looking for "lovers." Deuteronomy 23:18 seems to include dogs (כֶּלֶב MT; cf. "a male prostitute" NRSVue) in the context of prohibiting the use of wages from sex work in the temple.[20]

These pejorative comparisons are by no means limited to the Hebrew Bible. Philo condemns men who desire to enter into non-procreative unions with infertile women,

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[16] Bestiality was certainly practiced in the ANE (and even approved of in certain cases among the Hittites [see "The Hittite Laws" §187–188, §199–200A," *ANET*, 196–97]), but the only mentions of it in the Hebrew Bible occur in legal condemnations (Exod 22:18; Lev 18:23; 20:15–16; Deut 27:21).

[17] Kenneth E. Bailey and William L. Holladay explain the image graphically: "the habits of the female ass in heat are dramatic and vulgar. […] What she is really doing is *snuffing* the dust which is soaked with the urine of a male ass. With her neck stretched to the utmost she slowly draws in a long, deep breath, then lets out an earthshaking bray and doubles her pace, racing down the road in search of the male. […] The passage emerges as one of Jeremiah's most vivid descriptions of Israel's lusting after the Baals" ("The 'Young Camel' and 'Wild Ass' in Jer. II 23–25," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 [1968]: 256–264, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853368X00195, here 259).

[18] Boniface repeats this comparison in the mid-eighth century CE: "We suffer from the disgrace of our people whether it be told by Christians or pagans that the English race reject the usages of other peoples and the apostolic commands—nay, the ordinance of God—and refuse to hold to one wife, basely defiling and mixing up everything with their adulterous lusts, like whinnying horses or braying asses" (Boniface, *The Letters of Saint Boniface,* trans. Ephraim Emerton [New York: Columbia University Press, 2000], letter 58).

[19] Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

[20] But see Elaine Adler Goodfriend, "Could *keleb* in Deuteronomy 23:19 Actually Refer to a Canine?", in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 381–97.

calling them those who "copulate like pigs or goats" (συῶν τρόπον ἢ τράγων ὀχεύοντες) and whose "names should be inscribed in the lists of the impious as adversaries of God" (ἐν ἀσεβῶν στήλαις ἐγγραφέσθωσαν ὡς ἀντίπαλοι θεοῦ) (*Spec.* 3.36). Clement of Alexandria condemns pederasts for acting like hyenas (though we may rightly question the accuracy of his knowledge of hyena behavior here), calling the practitioner a "beast" (θηρίον) who is "given up to pleasures to walk by the law of quadrupeds" (ἔκδοτοι λάγνοι τετραπόδων νόμῳ βαίνουσι) (Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.10 [PG 8:501b, my translation]). In the Talmud, b. Ber. 58a records the condemnation of a Jewish man marrying an Egyptian woman, noting that this consort with a non-Jew is as if "he had intercourse with a she-ass" (דבא על חמרתא).[21] Reversing this Jew-Gentile dynamic, in sixteenth-century France, a Christian man was executed for having children with a Jewish woman "since coition with a Jewess is precisely the same as if a man should copulate with a dog."[22] In the late medieval era, some Christians used animalizing rhetoric not only against Jews but Muslims as well: the theologian Jacques de Vitry said their sex practices made them "like mindless horses or mules" (*sicut equus et mulus quibus non est intellectus*),[23] and the Dominican monk William of Adam said the Saracens were like

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[21] *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Zeraʾim: Berakoth*, trans. Maurice Simon (New York: Rebecca Bennet, 1959).

[22] Jacob Döpler, *Theatrum poenarum, suppliciorum et executionum criminalium* (Sondershausen: L. H. Schönermarck, 1697), 2:154: "weil es eben so viel sey wenn man bey einer Jüdin schliefe / als wenn man mit einen Hund zu thun hätte." This translation comes from E. P. Evans, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), 153, who introduced this line into Anglophone literature (where it has been widely quoted), though he cites an incorrect page number. See also the earlier record of this incident in Nicolas Bohier, *Decisiones Aureae in sacro Burdegalensium senatu olim discussarum* (Venetia: 1576), 780.

[23] Jacques de Vitry, *Libri duo, quorum prior orientalis sive Hierosolymitanae: alter, Occidentalis Historiæ nomine inscribitur* (Douai, France: Officina Typographica Balthazaris, 1597), 1:17–18. This translation comes from John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of

"mad dogs" (*canes insani*) in their alleged lustfulness.[24] Beyond focusing on the identities of the sexual participants, particular sex acts or positions have also garnered the ire of concerned writers: in the 11th century CE, the bishop Burchard of Worms demanded penance from those who perform sex "doggystyle" (*canino more*) (*Decretum* 19.5), and Giles of Rome calls same-gender intercourse "bestiality" (*bestialitatem*).[25]

As with the complimentary usage of animal imagery, the pejorative usage continues well into the modern era. Shakespeare combines this animal imagery with exclusion of ethnic outsiders: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (*Othello* 1.1.90–91). White racists of the nineteenth century used this same animalizing logic on people of African descent:

> Despite their different starting points, most racial thinkers based many of their most important conclusions on the same criterion—the African's penis. It was stared at, feared (and in some cases desired), weighed, interpreted via Scripture, meditated on by zoologists and anthropologists, preserved in specimen jars, and, most of all, calibrated. And, in nearly every instance, its size was deemed proof that the Negro was less a man than a beast.[26]

In various ways, sexualized animal language is weaponized against other minority groups as well.[27] Anyone following the growing discussion and eventual success of marriage equality for same-sex couples in the U.S. will have heard frequent comparisons of same-

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Chicago Press, 1980), 281.

[24] William of Adam, *How To Defeat the Saracens*, trans. Giles Constable (Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2012), 32–33.

[25] Giles of Rome, *In Epistolam beati Pauli Apostoli ad Romanos commentarii* (Rome: Antonius Bladus, 1555), 12 v.

[26] David M. Friedman, *A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 106–7.

[27] Examples abound, but see for instance the discussion of "Yellow Peril" and Fu Manchu in Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395447, 106–26.

sex intercourse with bestiality.[28]

All of these negative comparisons share a similar logic: human sexuality is disparaged by being described in animal terms, and the concrete person so described is considered subhuman. These authors see themselves or their group as normatively and properly human, whereas outsiders and others are closer to animals. The category of "humanity" in these examples is not the simple status of belonging to the species *Homo sapiens* but rather entails phenotypical, behavioral, religious, and cultural facets. If one is seen to deviate from expectations in these facets, it can entail the loss of human status, and with it the denial of privileges that attain to those in the dominant and properly human group. In this way, these characterizations provide rhetorical support for the oppression of those people whom the authors deem less human or inhuman. For people in power, what Cary Wolfe calls "the discourse of species" has always been available to be deployed against those with less power.[29] In this rhetoric, animal sexuality creeps its way into human sexuality, turning it monstrous and unnatural. Beyond merely insulting, when animals appear within the realm of human sexuality, often even life itself is at stake for those on the wrong side of the human-animal divide.

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[28] Joshua Divine, a judicial appointee from the Trump administration, make for a convenient example; see John Russell, "Senate Confirms Lifetime Seat for Trump Judicial Appointee Who Compared Being Gay to Bestiality," *LGBTQ Nation* (July 23, 2025), https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2025/07/senate-confirms-lifetime-seat-for-judicial-appointee-who-compared-being-gay-to-bestiality/.

Ben Carson's comments during his interview with Sean Hannity (*Hannity Live*, Fox News, March 26, 2013), well publicized at the time, make for a convenient example: "My thoughts are that marriage is between a man and a woman. It's a well-established, fundamental pillar of society, and no group—be they gays, be they NAMBLA, be they people who believe in bestiality, it doesn't matter what they are—they don't get to change the definition."

[29] Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

Thus, these two ways of employing erotic animal imagery exist in the Hebrew Bible and other literature: one deploying animalizing language for the purposes of compliments, romance, and intimacy, and the other deploying such language for the purpose of exclusion, debasement, and oppression. Considering how common this erotic animal imagery is, with both positive and negative functions, we might justifiably ask, how should we read the Song's animal imagery?

The Song's Positive Animal Imagery

What makes the Song unique among the texts of the Hebrew Bible is that its erotic animal imagery is largely positive. There are a few moments where nonhuman animals might represent something other than compliments (specifically the foxes in 2:15 and the big cats of 4:8), but for the most part, the Song celebrates its human lovers by means of nonhuman images.[30] But more importantly, considering that the rhetorical basis for the pejorative usage of animal rhetoric is a fear of animal sexuality creeping into the domain of the human, the Song displays no knowledge of this fear. As my reading will attempt to show, the Song never shies away from mixing animals and humans in erotic contexts—in fact, it revels in it!

As a result, I argue that for the Song, *human sexuality is always already animal sexuality*. Whereas for most commentators, the Song's purported topic of "human sexuality" includes only humans, I suggest that a reading informed by attention to

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[30] Ellen Bernstein, "The Ecotheology of the Song of Songs," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology*, ed. Hilary Marlow and Mark Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 197–210, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190606732.013.2, here 203.

nonhuman animals can reveal that what we call "human sexuality" is merely one subset of a larger erotic world—a wonderfully diverse world full of various animals' bodies, movements, and desires. As Roland Boer notes, "if the Song is indeed 'about' sex in some way, then that sex can hardly be restricted to human beings."[31] To be human in this love poem is to be but one of many sexual animals.

Moreover, just as pejorative uses of sexual animal imagery have the effect of blurring the line between humans and animals, so also can we see this line blurred in positive uses of the same imagery. Pejorative animalizing rhetoric has a clear harmful effect for those on the receiving end, and this effect is based on how humans already view nonhuman animals. If we moved all members of *Homo sapiens* to the category of the properly human, it would improve the lives of those on the human side of the line, but it does nothing for the many nonhuman animals whose lives are made miserable by human intervention. Thus, as many animal studies scholars have tried to show, it is more and more important for humans to see similarities with the nonhuman inhabitants of our world and to question those anthropocentric views that position humans above other animals.[32] Challenging these perspectives is essential not only to alleviate the dangers that these species hierarchies impose on humans outside of dominant or normative groups but also to create a more just world for all sentient creatures. The boundary between

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[31] Roland Boer, "A Fleshly Reading: Masochism, Ecocriticism, and the Song of Songs," in *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity, and Carnality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 31.

[32] See, e.g., Matthew Calarco, *Thinking through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015). Approaches that Calarco identifies "identity" approaches aim to show how nonhuman animals are similar to human animals, and "indistinction" approaches question claims of human uniqueness.

human and animal in the Song is quite fuzzy: for instance, Hendrik Viviers sees "[h]umans 'becoming' Nature and Nature 'becoming' human,"[33] and Elaine James argues, "The Song's animal imagery has the effect of animalising the human as well as humanising the animal."[34] I highlight this fuzzy boundary not for its own sake but because it can be an incitement to examine our own anthropocentric ethics and practices. As the Song so fervently celebrates what is animal about humans, so also may we celebrate what is animal about ourselves.

This dissertation thus argues two major points. First, human sexuality in the Song is an animal sexuality. That is, sexuality is a domain that is shared between humans and nonhumans alike. Second, rather than fearing this erotic proximity between humans and animals, this poem's ambiguous species boundaries can pose a challenge to the species hierarchies that hurt both humans and nonhumans.

Nonhuman Animals in the History of Interpretation

Before proceeding to my own reading of the Song and its animals, however, some word on how we got here is necessary—recognizing, of course, that the history of the interpretation of the Song of Songs is a vast subject spanning multiple millennia, religions, and interpretive methods, and I can't possibly treat it thoroughly here.[35] In this

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[33] Hendrik Viviers, "Eco-Delight in the Song of Songs," in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, The Earth Bible 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 149.

[34] Yvonne Sophie Thöne, "Female Humanimality: Animal Imagery in the Song of Songs and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography," *Journal for Semitics* 25 (2017): 389–408, https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/2546, here 392.

[35] For substantive discussions of the history of the Song's interpretation, see especially Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs, Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857); Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7C (New Haven, CT: Yale

section, I will show how the nonhuman animal imagery in the book is rarely used as a chance to examine the animal itself or the animality of the human characters but is almost always deployed as a point of departure for exploring an author's own (decidedly human) concerns.

Briefly put, the history on this topic proceeds as follows. Among the many pre-modern interpretive traditions, one commonality is the tendency to look upward from the "plain sense" meaning of the text to a higher meaning, typically some allegorical relationship between God and Israel (in Judaism) or Christ and the church (in Christianity). Modern critical readings, while leaving behind allegory as a method, exhibit similar tendencies, leaping from the animal imagery into higher meanings about human sexuality and, more recently, a return to the heavenly meanings of spirituality. In both pre-modern and modern interpretations, the earthiness of the animal is considered

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University Press, 1977); and Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 245–310. Most commentaries contain at least a small section on the topic, but see also these monographs: Eduard Cunitz, *Histoire critique de l'interprétation du Cantique des Cantiques*, Bachelor's thesis, University of Strasbourg, 1834); Johann Wilhem Riedel, *Die Auslegung des Hohenliedes in der jüdischen Gemeinde und der griechischen Kirche* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1898); and Jean-François Six, *Le chant de l'amour: Éros dans la Bible* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995). See also these articles: H. H. Rowley, "The Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Journal of Theological Studies* 38 (1937): 337–63; André Cabassut and Michel Olphe-Galliard, "Cantique des Cantiques II: Histoire de l'interprétation spirituelle," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité: Acétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. Marcel Viller*, et al.* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1953), 2:93–109; David Lerch, "Zur Geschichte der Auslegung des Hohenliedes," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 54 (1957): 257–77; William E. Phipps, "The Plight of the Song of Songs," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974): 82–100; Peter Kuhn, "Hoheslied II. Auslegungsgeschichte im Judentum," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Müller (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 15:503–8, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110867978-089; Jean M. Vincent, "Hoheslied III. Auslegungsgeschichte im Christentum," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Müller (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 15:508–514, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110867978-089; J. Paul Tanner, "The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 23–46; Frédéric Manns, "Jewish Interpretations of the Song of Songs," *Liber Annuus* 58 (2008): 277–95, https://doi.org/10.1484/J.LA.3.9; Richard Beaton, "Song of Songs 3: History of Interpretation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 760–69; and Jean-Jacques Lavoie, "La réception du Cantique des cantiques: Des lectures spirituelles aux lectures queer," *Science et Esprit* 66 (2014): 213–42.

only long enough to gain a foothold to climb to something higher. While most biblical scholars continue to follow this modern track, a few readings of the Song, however, draw on ecology and animal studies and have tended to give more consideration to the animals and animality of the poem.

Allegorical Interpretations

The earliest extant readings of the Song of Songs already seek to rise above the animal imagery of the poem by finding higher meanings in it, and this trend continues for centuries thereafter. These pre-modern interpretations primarily read the text through various lenses that can (somewhat reductively) be called allegorical. Since the modern era, allegorical interpretations have often been characterized as repressive toward eroticism, especially as monks read their own celibate practice into the Song:

> Celibate Christian theologians were thus able by allegory to unsex the Sublime Song and make it a hymn of spiritual and mystical love without carnal taint. *Canticum Canticorum* thus became the favorite book of ascetics and monastics who found in it, and in expansive sermons and commentaries on it, the means to rise above earthly and fleshly desire to the pure platonic love of the virgin soul for God.[36]

For Pope, as for many other modern readers, allegory represents disgust with erotic love in favor of spiritual love. To be sure, many ancient readers do demonstrate a fair share of discomfort with the idea of making the Song too down-to-earth, as in the oft-cited judgment attributed to Rabbi Akiva: “He who, at a banquet, renders the Song of Songs in a sing-song way, turning it into a common ditty, has no share in the world to come” (t.

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[36] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 114.

Sanh. 12.10).[37] So for Gregory of Nyssa, the surface-level meaning of the Song is something that must be "cleansed" (κεκαθαρμένην, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* prologue [*GNO* 6:4] [Norris]).

This is not to say that allegorical interpretations go so far as to deny any "plain sense" meaning of the text. Rather, they recognize that it is a love poem but believe it is more than that as well. Origen, for instance, proposes that the Song is "an epithalamium, that is to say, a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama" (*Comm. Cant.* prologue.1 [Lawson]). But the "plain sense" is only a first step—what is needed is to find the spiritual meaning beyond the physical one. Depending upon one's purposes, this move is not necessarily all bad: more recent commentators, such as Roland Murphy, have begun to recognize how the goal of allegory is not the negative move of repressing sexuality but rather the positive move of the "construction and maintenance of a Christian world view."[38] Stephen D. Moore has shown that these allegorical interpretations frequently celebrate the male-male love of monk and Christ, which is a homoeroticism lost in modernity with the rise of the discourse of homosexuality.[39] In addition, Cheryl Exum has noted that the Song "lends itself to allegorical interpretation" because it invites the reader to identify with the lovers open-endedly, without defining who the poem's lovers are.[40] However, because they do not emphasize the surface meaning of the text,

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[37] *Tractate Sanhedrin: Mishnah and Tosefta*, trans. Herbert Danby (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 121.

[38] Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb936wk, 16.

[39] Stephen D. Moore, "The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality," in *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 21–89.

[40] J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville:

pre-modern readers have not focused on the Song's animals in and of themselves but rather have read these animals only as a way to explore a higher meaning. A full exploration of allegory's tendencies is impossible here, but a few examples can demonstrate the shift away from the mundane animal.

Perhaps the first known Christian interpreter of the Song, Hippolytus's third-century CE commentary on the book leaps over the gazelle/deer itself in Song 2:8–9, 17 to identify it as a symbol of the speed of the spread of the gospel (*In Cant.* 22.1). Origen, to his credit, a little later in the third century, examines the animal *qua* animal in Song 2:9 by considering as many scriptural mentions of deer as he can remember, among them the dietary instructions of Deuteronomy 14:4–5, the panting deer of Psalm 42:2, and the birthing does of Job 39:1. Eventually, however, he pivots and distinguishes between "visible harts" and the "spiritual harts," the latter which are watched over by God and perfected by his voice (*Comm. Cant*. 3.12). Origen is not ultimately concerned with any real deer or with the deer-ness of the human or the humanness of deer but rather only with deer insofar as they point to something higher. According to Pope, Origen's allegorizing of the poem has "denatured it and transformed it into a spiritual drama free from all carnality."[41]

The Targum fits the equid imagery of Song 1:9 into its historical allegory about Israel, with the mention of Pharaoh in this verse being a perfect launching point to talk about the delivery from Egypt and the crossing of the Reed Sea. Specifically, the author

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Westminster John Knox, 2005), 77.

[41] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 115.

describes how God enacts his anger against Egypt, but just when this rage was about to overflow and injure Israel along with their enemies, the righteous Moses steps in and calms the Lord (Tg. Song 1:9). Moses is the star here, and the corpses of Egypt's horses provide the stage for him to shine; the Song thus becomes "about" something other than its animals. Similarly, Bernard of Clairvaux also connects this mare comparison with Israel's delivery from Egypt but, as many Christians are wont to do, associates the exodus in turn to the church's delivery from sin (*On the Song of Songs* 39.2). Not pausing at all to think on the horse image, he immediately considers the evils that Pharaoh's chariots represent. For instance, he names Malice as one of Pharaoh's three captains, and "Malice has a chariot with four wheels named Cruelty, Impatience, Recklessness and Impudence," as well as two horses named Power and Pomp (*On the Song of Songs* 39.6–8 [Walsh]). The lesson Bernard takes from the Song's mare has nothing to do with the creature itself but rather serves to illustrate the dangers that his hearers should avoid.

Song of Songs Rabbah reads Song 2:15's foxes as various threatening nations: Egypt (Song Rab. 2.15.1), Edom (2.15.2), or the "four kingdoms" of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome (2.15.2).[42] Rashi, choosing only the Egyptian identification, makes the danger more intimate, depicting Egyptian soldiers moving from house to house looking for Israelite boys to murder, like a fox moving vine by vine looking for food. Christian interpreters also have identified the foxes with various threats to their own communities: heretics (Const. ap. 8.18), temptations (Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* 64.1), "false brethren" and "heresies" (Martin Luther[43]), and Satan himself (Gregory of

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[42] *Midrash Rabbah: Song of Songs*, trans. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1939).

[43] Martin Luther, "A Brief but Altogether Lucid Commentary on the Song of Songs," in *Luther's*

Narek[44]). In every case, the verse in question is not about foxes but rather something else entirely, namely the concerns of the writer's own community.

Perhaps Gregory of Nyssa best captures this movement away from the animal in his "anagogical interpretation" (τὴν διὰ τῆς ἀναγωγῆς θεωρίαν, *Homilies* prologue [*GNO* 6:5]). For Gregory, a proper interpretation of the Song should draw a reader's understanding upward to God ("anagogical" comes from ἀνάγειν = to go/lead upward), away from the carnality of the "plain sense" of the text. The anagogically minded reader of the book will "draw out no fleshly meaning from its words" (πρὸς μηδεμίαν σαρκώδη διάνοιαν ἐκ τῶν λεγομένων κατασυρόμενοι, *Homilies* 9 [*GNO* 6:262]). Instead, such a reader will transpose the outward meaning of the words into the key of what is "pure and undefiled, setting his mind on things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand" of the Father.

> ἐπὶ τὸ καθαρὸν καὶ ἀκήρατον μετοίσει τὰς τῶν ῥημάτων ἐμφάσεις τὰ ἄνω φρονῶν, Οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ πατρὸς καθήμενος. (*Homilies* 9 [*GNO* 6:262])

In order to make this move from the "outward" or "plain sense" meaning up to the anagogical meaning, the reader must disavow their own animal nature. This is demonstrated early in Gregory's homilies, where he warns that the interpreter should not "drag the undefiled words of the Bridegroom and Bride down to the level of brutish, irrational passions" (τὰς κηράτους τοῦ νυμφίου τε καὶ τῆς νύμφης φωνὰς εἰς κτηνώδη καὶ ἄλογα καθέλκων πάθη, *Homilies* 1 [*GNO* 6:15] [Norris]), or, in an alternative translation,

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Works, vol. 15, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 221.

[44] Gregory of Narek, *The Blessing of Blessings: Gregory of Narek's Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. Roberta R. Ervine, Cistercian Studies Series 215 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2007), 113.

the reader should avoid "dragging the uncontaminated speeches of the bride and bridegroom down into the passions of livestock and animals."[45] The fleshiness of the text that poses a danger to the Christian interpreter is precisely the animality of the text: "the project of anagogical exegesis is an endeavor to negate and suppress the threats of animality."[46]

Though Gregory of Nyssa is specific about his terminology, the anagogical or upward movement is shared by nearly every pre-modern interpreter. If the animals mentioned throughout the Song are ever considered in and of themselves, it is only to provide a foundation for the reader to move upward into a spiritual domain. The animal *qua* animal—and the animality of humans—is left behind in favor of the animal *qua* spiritual symbol.

Modern Scholarly Interpretations

Modern critical scholars can generally be characterized by their rejection of allegorical interpretations and an embrace of the "plain sense" meaning of the text—that is, the assumption that the Song is "about" human love and sexuality in some way. With this anthropocentric teleology in mind, most scholars have read the poem's animal imagery for the purpose of "decoding" it in order to find the true human meaning lying beneath the nonhuman metaphor. Sometimes this view of interpretation as decoding appears

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[45] Eric Daryl Meyer, "Gregory of Nyssa and Jacques Derrida on the Human-Animal Distinction in the Song of Songs," in *The Bible and Posthumanism*, ed. Jennifer L. Koosed, Semeia Studies 74 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 199–223, 10.2307/j.ctt1287n8s.12, here 205.

[46] Meyer, "Gregory of Nyssa and Jacques Derrida," 205. For a helpful and more thorough discussion of anagogy and animality, see the rest of Meyer's article.

explicitly, as in Edwin Good's discussion of "the foxes and the gazelles as codes."[47] In addition, another trend in modern scholarship has appeared among writers who aren't willing to entirely sever interpretation of the Song from its theological history: recent decades have seen a few scholars reappropriating the language of spirituality in their discussions of the Song's human sexuality, arguing that for the human subjects of the poem and its audience, sex can also be spiritual. In my view, this resistance to dwelling on animality and this rush to find a human meaning within both of these trends (whether "plain sense" erotic or spiritually inflected) does not mark a break from the allegorical mode of interpretation, in its lack of full consideration of the Song's animals—rather, in spite of modern scholars' own protestations against allegory, this aim to "decode" the poem's animal language is yet another attempt to leave behind its earthiness and to leap to a higher meaning and is in this way quite contiguous with previous allegorical readings. Most scholars, like their pre-modern forebears, continue to be concerned with human-centered and heaven-minded meanings rather than the Song's zoopoetics.

A few examples will help demonstrate my point, beginning with the "plain sense" interpretation. For instance, when the beloved's eyes are likened to "doves beside springs of water, / bathed in milk, fitly set" (5:12 NRSVue), Roland Murphy notes that this comparison "is usually explained as referring to the eyes set in white ('washing in milk') and in sockets ('sitting in fullness')."[48] Similarly, Garrett notes that "'eyes like doves' seems to be a stock metaphor. 'Washed in milk' may refer to the white of the eye, in

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[47] Edwin M. Good, *The Song of Songs: Codes of Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 27–30.

[48] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 172.

which the pupils are like bathing doves."[49] The goal in this interpretive move is to produce a human-centered meaning—eyes that appear striking to the viewer—rather than to meditate on the life and habits of a dove. This is not to say that interpreters ignore dove ecology altogether; for his part Murphy says that these metaphorical doves "are wet with the water and their feathers shine," which is a reasonable description of the common bathing behavior seen in birds.[50] But the doves and their hygiene are not the point for him. Instead, he concludes his discussion by proclaiming, "There is no certain interpretation of this verse"[51]—an expression of apparent dissatisfaction in the scholarly community's inability to successfully decode this poetic image. The human meaning, however indeterminate, is the objective here, and the dove imagery is merely a path to reach that objective.

In Song 2:8–9, the man is compared to a gazelle or deer, "leaping" and "bounding" toward the woman. Most readers see this gazelle/deer imagery as a symbol in need of translation. For Zakovitch, it indicates the man's "leichtfüßiges Hineilen zu ihr" ("light-footed hurrying to her"),[52] and likewise for Exum, it "suggests speed and agility."[53] These commentators and most others make note of other instances of gazelles and deer in the Hebrew Bible, and some attention is often paid to the gazelle and deer as

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[49] Duane A. Garrett, "Song of Songs," in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 414.

[50] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 166.

[51] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 172.

[52] Yair Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 148.

[53] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 126.

prey animals for whom these speedy movements are a necessity. But again, the aim is to reach an anthropocentric meaning—the flighty quadruped here is a just a stepping stone to help the reader imagine the swift human lover. In general, commentators see this animal language as a metaphor substituted for what could have been literal language, so the goal of interpretation becomes the reversal of this substitution—uncovering the human face under the animal mask.

I'll be quick to note that not every interpreter slavishly follows this exact track. Indeed, Richard Soulen distinguishes a "representational" mode of reading—the aforementioned mode in which the purpose of a metaphor is to "provide a parallel to visual appearance"—from a "presentational" mode of reading whose purpose is instead to communicate "the feelings and sense experiences of the poet himself."[54] Soulen himself prefers the latter's emphasis on experience over adherence to visual appearance: "The writer is not concerned that his hearers be able to retell in descriptive language the particular qualities or appearance of the woman described; he is much more interested that they share his joy, awe, and delight."[55] A "presentationally"-minded interpreter, then, might suggest that the horse metaphor of Song 1:9 is not about the woman's equine appearance ("He is not saying she looks like a horse!" Garrett exclaims) but rather about the feelings of "value," "beauty," and "dignity" that the woman evokes within the man.[56]

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[54] Richard Soulen, "The *Waṣfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 183–90, https://doi.org/10.2307/3263272, here 187.

[55] Soulen, "The *Waṣfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic," 190. For dissenting opinions, see Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 127–35, and Brian P. Gault, *Body As Landscape, Love As Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 36 (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), chap. 2.

[56] Garrett, "Song of Songs," 388.

However, regardless of whether a metaphor is taken as descriptive of physical attributes or of “feelings and sense experiences,” the resulting interpretations generally remain steadfastly anthropocentric. Even when they are looking for emotions instead of a clear description of a lover’s body, they are still looking for a human meaning. (Scholars frequently balk at the woman’s comparison to a horse, but no one stops to ask how a horse might feel about being compared to a human!)

Along with, and in reaction to, modern scholarship’s move away from allegory as the primary interpretive mode for the Song, another set of readings has arisen that attempts to recover the spirituality of the Song. Broadly speaking, these readers accept the modern claim that the Song is love poetry, but they tend to point out that just because the Song isn’t strictly speaking allegorical doesn’t mean we can’t divine theological relevance in it. The Song’s man and woman lovers are humans and not stand-ins for God and Israel or Christ and the church, but for these readers, the love of a mere man and woman is no less meaningful.

For scholars interested in the book’s spiritual side, the Song works most powerfully as an example of proper love. Delitzsch suggests that it portrays “the divinely-ordered marriage relation,”[57] in spite of the fact that the Song never refers to the two lovers as married.[58] For Young, the Song “is didactic and moral in its purpose” as it shows “the God-given standard of marriage” and “how pure and noble true love is,” even

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[57] Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton, Clark’s Foreign Theological Library 4/54 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 5.

[58] J. L. Andruska, “Unmarried Lovers in the Song of Songs,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 72 (2022): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flab019.

pointing readers to God's love, "a love that is purer than our own."[59] Beaton suggests that the Song represents "God's view of an appropriate expression of human love and sexuality as expressed through the cultural medium of that period."[60] Under the new paradigm of reading the Song as love poetry, it "now becomes a beautiful erotic poem that lauds human sexuality between a man and woman within a monogamous relationship. Some sex therapists go so far as to use it as a handbook of sorts for helping couples with difficulties in their sexual relationship."[61] Ayo declares, "Love is never just physical. The Song of Songs is not unworthy of the Bible, because the body is ever with the soul, and both are for God's grace."[62] Even scholars otherwise concerned mostly with historical criticism, like Roland Murphy, can't help but wax poetic about the Song's higher meanings: "Human sexual fulfillment, fervently sought and consummated in reciprocal love between woman and man: Yes, that is what the Song of Songs is about, in its literal sense and theologically relevant meaning."[63]

Perhaps nowhere is the use of the Song as spiritual advice more on display than in the work of Richard Davidson. In a 1989 article, he agrees that the Song is something of a "Biblical Guide to Married Love"[64] and goes on to argue that "human love at its best, as

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[59] Edward Joseph Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), 336.

[60] Beaton, "Song of Songs 3: History of Interpretation," 769.

[61] Beaton, "Song of Songs 3: History of Interpretation," 767.

[62] Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 61.

[63] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 103.

[64] Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs: Return to Eden," 14, approvingly citing the conservative evangelical sex ethics of Joseph C. Dillow, *Solomon on Sex* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1977).

described in the Song, points beyond itself to the Lord of love."[65] But his 2007 book goes further; it is a tour de force of condemnations against evangelical culture-war boogeymen, with sections decrying the evils of homosexuality, transvestism, bestiality, polygamy, adultery, divorce, and incest. The solution to these spiritual ills? We must, he argues, return to the divinely sanctioned model of sexuality that first appeared in Eden and that is most fully developed in the Song of Songs. According to the design of creation, "sexuality is for heterosexual human couples"[66] and is meant to be strictly monogamous.[67]

Not every spiritually minded reading comes from a conservative and/or queerphobic standpoint. For instance, King deploys the Song for more progressive purposes: "the text is not principally concerned with extolling the virtues of heterosexual love per se. Rather, it celebrates the gift of human love itself, apart from any external measure of its worth."[68] Rather than valuing the only proper sexuality as straight, King suggests that the Song can mean that sexuality in general is a valued aspect of the created order, so queer people should feel free to celebrate their own sexuality. Likewise, Lavoie and Létourneau outline a number of readings that show the powerful example of the Song in blurring gender lines and demonstrating reciprocal desire.[69]

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[65] Davidson, "Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs: Return to Eden," 18.

[66] Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 556.

[67] Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 561–69.

[68] Christopher King, "A Love as Fierce as Death: Reclaiming the Song of Songs for Queer Lovers," in *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible*, ed. Robert E. Goss and Mona West (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2000), 128.

[69] Jean-Jacques Lavoie and Anne Létourneau, "Herméneutique *queer* et Cantique des Cantiques,"

I'll happily grant that some of these interpretations might be helpful for faith communities today, but like the more staid historical-critical interpretations, they all suffer from an anthropocentric perspective. These theological readings search for human meanings. For them, sexuality isn't considered a virtue for all of God's creatures; rather, it "is a vital part of God's gracious design for *human* life."[70] The point of the Song's animal imagery is to show the lovers complimenting each other and therefore acting as exemplars of sexuality for humans. Whether seen as merely erotic poetry or as a paean to the significance of sexuality, throughout modern interpretations the Song generally remains a human-centered document.

Ecological Interpretations

While most modern interpreters seek to produce a human meaning without dwelling too much on the nonhuman, a notable exception is the recent trend of ecological interpretations of the Song. As I have done with regard to animals, so also Elaine James critiques both allegorical and modern scholarly approaches that skip too quickly to the human: "The literal/erotic interpretation of the Song results in directing attention away from the landscape as thoroughly as allegorical approaches do."[71] In describing explanations of the garden imagery in Song 4, James notes, "Scholarly attempts to pinpoint a specific body part evoked by the image jump too quickly to an explication of

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Laval théologique et philosophique 66 (2010): 503–28.

[70] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 100, emphasis mine.

[71] Elaine T. James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs: Poetry and Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190619015.001.0001, 6.

the garden as part of the human body, instead of pausing, as the poem does, with an appreciation of the floral elements of the garden."[72] For readers like James, there is value in focusing on the natural vehicles of these metaphors, rather than merely on anthropocentric concerns.

A number of scholars in the past few decades have explored the Song's ecological aspects. For instance, Roland Boer celebrates the verdant springtime setting of Song 2, intentionally thinking apart from the human tenor of the scene's metaphor: "Released from the connections with human beings, the natural world that appears before us is one at the end of winter and its rains."[73] Carey Ellen Walsh observes that this book "is a paean to the outdoors, to a creation wholly lit up. […] Losing an anthropocentric perspective, the Song gives way to more, not less, for humans and for animals."[74] Hendrik Viviers argues that "Earth/Nature" in the Song is represented "as a full-fledged signifying *subject*"[75] and suggests the Song allows us to see nature as a "partner" in contemplation, as it shows us "nature is indeed good to think by!"[76] Carole Fontaine offers "an Earth-identified reading" that sees Earth as "the beloved who initiates the search for unity, and who brings forth the product of that union."[77] Elaine Davis

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[72] James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 74.

[73] Roland Boer, *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity, and Carnality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 39.

[74] Carey Walsh, "The Beasts of Wisdom: Ecological Hermeneutics of the Wild," *Biblical Interpretation* 25 (2017): 135–48, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00250A03, here 145–46.

[75] Viviers, "Eco-Delight in the Song of Songs," 143, emphasis original.

[76] Hendrik Viviers, "Gardens as 'Partners' in Contemplation: Reading the Stories of the First Eden (Genesis 2–3) and a Restored Eden (Song of Songs) through the Lens of Attention Restoration Theory," *Journal for Semitics* 25 (2017): 347–70, https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/2542, here 368.

[77] Carole R. Fontaine, "'Go Forth into the Fields': An Earth-Centered Reading of the Song of Songs," in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, The Earth Bible

proclaims, “The Song may be altogether the most ‘ecological’ book in the Bible.”[78] I could go on.[79]

The work done within this ecological hermeneutics is significant in its shift away from anthropocentrism. However, a lack remains. These readers focus primarily or exclusively on the environment as a whole—whole landscapes, whole cityscapes, whole economies. Largely ignored is the uniqueness and particularity of the animal comparisons. While the Song does indeed compare its lovers to mountains and gates and other physical features, what lies unexplored is the very real commonalities between humans and other animals: behaviorally, rationally, and, yes, erotically. James maintains, “Throughout the Song […] the land is eroticized.”[80] I do not disagree, but if this is true, then it is also true that nonhuman animals are eroticized. Or, stated more accurately, perhaps they are simply acknowledged as erotic creatures. They are not *made* into something erotic but *recognized* as already erotic, and in the Song’s animal metaphors humans share the eroticism of their nonhuman neighbors. All animals—both human and nonhuman—are sexual creatures in the Song, so what is needed is an approach to this

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3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 142.

[78] Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 265.

[79] See also Ellen Bernstein, “The Natural Intelligence of the Song of Songs,” in *The Gift of Creation: Images from Scripture and Earth*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Morley, MO: Acclaim, 2009), 94–103; Ellen F. Davis, “Romance of the Land in the Song of Songs,” *Anglican Theological Review* 80 (1998): 533–46; Daniel Grossberg, “Nature, Humanity, and Love in Song of Songs,” *Interpretation* 59 (2005): 229–42; Annalet Van Schalkwyk, “Coming Home to the Body: An Ecofeminist Body Theological Reading of the Song of Songs,” *Journal for Semitics* 23.2ii (2014): 910–28; Bernstein, “The Ecotheology of the Song of Songs”; Kivatsi J. Kavusa, “The Bride as a ‘Locked Garden’: An Eco-Sustainability Retrieval of Nature Metaphor in Song of Songs 4:12–15,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43 (2022): a2607, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2607; Ellen Bernstein, *Toward a Holy Ecology: Reading the Song of Songs in the Age of Climate Crisis* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2024).

[80] James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 145.

love poetry that takes seriously its faunal imagery.

A "Furmeneutical" Approach

The study of nonhuman animals in the Hebrew Bible has generally been infrequent in the modern era. Throughout the 1800s, nonhuman animals in the Bible were discussed within what could be called a distinct genre of "scripture natural histories," many of which were addressed especially to a young audience.[81] The twentieth century saw more attempts to

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[81] See Jean-Jacques Scheuchzer, *Physique sacrée, ou Histoire-naturelle de la Bible*, 8 vols. (Amsterdam: Pierre Schenk and Pierre Mortier, 1732–1737); W. I. Bicknell, *Scripture Natural History, and Guide to General Zoology*, 2 vols. (London: Biggs & Co., 18--); Alexander Fletcher, *Scripture Natural History, vol. 1–2* (London: George Virtue, 18--); John Parker Lawson, *The Bible Cyclopedia: Containing the Biography, Geography, and Natural History of the Holy Scriptures, vols. 1–2: Geography and Natural History* (Edinburgh: A. Fullarton & Co., 18--); John Young, *Scripture Natural History* (London: Thomas Dean & Son, 18--); Thaddeus Mason Harris, *The Natural History of the Bible: or, A Description of All the Quadrupeds, Birds, Fishes, Reptiles and Insects, Trees, Plants, Gums, and Precious Stones, mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures* (Boston: Wells & Lilly, 1820); Henry Althans, *Scripture Natural History of Quadrupeds, with Reflections Designed for the Young, vol. 1* (Hartford, CT: D. F. Robinson & Co., 1828); Henry Althans, *Scripture Natural History of Birds, Insects, &tc., with Reflections Designed for the Young, vol. 2* (Hartford, CT: D. F. Robinson & Co., 1827); William Carpenter, *Scripture Natural History: or, A Descriptive Account of the Zoology, Botany, and Geology of the Bible* (London: Wightman & Cramp, 1828); Esther Hewlett (Copley), *Scripture Natural History for Youth, vol. 1* (London: H. Fisher, Son, & P. Jackson, 1829); Esther Hewlett (Copley), *Scripture Natural History for Youth, vol. 2* (London: H. Fisher, Son, & P. Jackson, 1828); Jonathan Fisher, *Scripture Animals, or, Natural History of the Living Creatures Named in the Bible* (Portland: W. Hyde, 1834); Thomas Tucker Smiley, *Scripture Natural History; or, A Concise Account of the Animals Referred to in the Bible* J. S. Clark, 1836); William Goodhugh and William Cooke Taylor, *The Bible Cyclopædia: or, Illustrations of the Civil and Natural History of the Sacred Writings, by Reference to the Manners, Customs, Rites, Traditions, Antiquities, and Literature of Eastern Nations, vol. 1* (London: John W. Parker, 1841); *Bible Quadrupeds: The Natural History of the Animals Mentioned in Scripture* [New York: Robert Sears, 1842]; William Goodhugh and William Cooke Taylor, *The Bible Cyclopædia: or, Illustrations of the Civil and Natural History of the Sacred Writings, by Reference to the Manners, Customs, Rites, Traditions, Antiquities, and Literature of Eastern Nations, vol. 2* (London: John W. Parker, 1843); Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *Scripture Natural History: Being an Account of Animals, Trees, Plants, and Precious Stones Mentioned in Holy Scripture* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1848); Presbyterian Board of Publication, *Scripture Natural History: Containing a Description of Quadrupeds, Birds, Reptiles, Amphibia, Fishes, Insects, Molluscous Animals, Corals, Plants, Trees, Precious Stones, and Metals, Mentioned in the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1854); F. O. Morris, *Bible Natural History: Containing a Description of Quadrupeds, Birds, Trees, Plants, Insects, etc., Mentioned in the Holy Scriptures* (Manchester: J. Ainsworth, 1856); John William Dawson, *Archaia: or, Studies of the Cosmogony and Natural History of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Montreal: B. Dawson & Son, 1860); J. G. Wood, *Bible Animals: Being a Description of Every Living Creature Mentioned in the Scriptures from the Ape to the Coral* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, & Dyer, 1869); Sunday School Union, *The Animals of the Bible: Comprising a Brief Description of the Various Animals, Birds, Reptiles, Insects, Etc., Etc., Mentioned In Holy Scripture* (London: Sunday School Union, 1875?); H. B. Tristam, *The Natural History of the Bible*,

provide encyclopedic accounts of biblical fauna in both popular[82] and scholarly[83] registers, and more specific treatments dealing with particular issues began to appear as well: for example, the relationship between humans and animals,[84] archaeology and

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4th ed. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1875); M. K. M., *Natural History of the Bible: A Book for the Young* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1881); and Henry Chichester Hart, *Scripture Natural History, vol. 2: The Animals Mentioned in the Bible* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1888).

[82] See Roy Pinney, *The Animals in the Bible: The Identity and Natural History of All the Animals Mentioned in the Bible*, The Frontiers of Knowledge Series (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1964); George Cansdale, *All the Animals of the Bible Lands* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970); United Bible Societies, *Fauna and Flora of the Bible*, 2nd ed., Helps for Translators (London: United Bible Societies, 1980); Peter France, *An Encyclopedia of Bible Animals* (Tel Aviv: Steimatzky, 1986); and Natan Slifkin, Chayot/*Wild Animals*, vol. 1 of *The Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom, the Samson Edition* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015).

[83] See Jean Calvet and Marcel Cruppi, *Les animaux dans la littérature sacrée* (Paris: Femand Lanore, 1956); Yehuda Feliks, *The Animal World of the Bible*, trans. Pinhas Irsai (Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1962); V. Møller-Christensen and K. E. Jordt Jørgensen, *Encyclopedia of Bible Creatures*, trans. Arne Unhjem, ed. M. Theodore Heinecken (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965); Azaria Alon, *The Natural History of the Land of the Bible* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969); and Edwin Firmage, "Zoology (Fauna)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1109–67, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261929-801. See also the less encyclopedic treatments in Othmar Keel and Thomas Staubli, *«Im Schatten Deiner Flügel»: Tiere in der Bibel und im Alten Orient* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 2001); Billie Jean Collins, ed., *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, Handbuch der Orientalistik 1/64 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400912.

[84] See F. S. Bodenheimer, *Animal and Man in Bible Lands*, Collection des travaux de l'Académie internationale d'histoire des sciences 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004625662; Walter Pangritz, *Das Tier in der Bibel* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 1963); Oded Borowski, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1998); Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Peter Riede, *Im Spiegel der Tiere: Studien zum Verhältnis von Mensch und Tier im alten Israel*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 187 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002); Benjamin S. Arbuckle and Sue Ann McCarty, eds., *Animals and Inequality in the Ancient World* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2014).

animals,[85] animals and religious traditions,[86] and animals and biblical imagery.[87] Today, scholars are giving more and more attention to nonhumans in the Hebrew Bible, producing studies both on specific species[88] and individual passages or books.[89]

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[85] See Benjamin S. Arbuckle, "Animals in the Ancient World," in *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, vol. 1*, ed. D. T. Potts, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 201–19; and Aharon Sasson, *Animal Husbandry in Ancient Israel: A Zooarchaeological Perspective on Livestock Exploitation, Herd Management and Economic Strategies*, Approaches to Anthropological Archaeology (London: Equinox, 2010).

[86] Marie-Louise Henry, *Das Tier im religiösen Bewusstsein des alttestamentlichen Menschen*, Sammlung gemeinverständlicher Vorträge und Schriften aus dem Gebiet der Theologie und Religionsgeschichte 220/221 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1958); Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto, eds., *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Ronald H. Isaacs, *Animals in Jewish Thought and Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2000); and Natan Slifkin, *Man and Beast: Our Relationships with Animals in Jewish Law and Thought* (Brooklyn, NY: Yashar Books, 2006).

[87] James A. Rimbach, "Animal Imagery in the Old Testament" (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1972); and Kirsten Nielsen, "'I am like a lion to Ephraim': Observations on Animal Imagery and Old Testament Theology," *Studia theologica* 61 (2007): 184–97.

[88] See Alice Parmelee, *All the Birds of the Bible: Their Stories, Identification and Meaning* (New Canaan, CN: Keats, 1959); David Winton Thomas, "*Kelebh* 'Dog': Its Origin and Some Usages of It in the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960): 410–27, https://doi.org/10.2307/1516335; F. Charles Fensham, "The Dog in Ex. XI 7," *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966): 504–7, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853366X00331; Michael Matthew Kaplan, "The Lion in the Hebrew Bible: A Study of Biblical Metaphor" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1981); Sophia Menache, "Dogs: God's Worst Enemies?", *Society and Animals* 5 (1997): 23–44; Heather A. McKay, "Through the Eyes of Horses: Representation of the Horse Family in the Hebrew Bible," in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 348 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 127–41; Joshua Schwartz, "Dogs in Jewish Society in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55 (2004): 246–77; Brent A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis (Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press, 2005); Deborah O'Daniel Cantrell, *The Horsemen of Israel: Horses and Chariotry in Monarchic Israel (Ninth-Eighth Centuries B.C.E.)*, History, Archaeology, and Culture of the Levant 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Kenneth C. Way, *Donkeys in the Biblical World: Ceremony and Symbol*, History, Archaeology, and Culture of the Levant 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv18r6r5m; and Debbie Blue, *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to the Birds of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013).

[89] See Bailey and Holladay, "The 'Young Camel' and 'Wild Ass' in Jer. II 23–25"; S. P. Toperoff, "Canines in Bible and Midrash," *Dor le Dor* 16 (1987): 114–17; Walter Houston, *Purity and Monotheism: Clean and Unclean Animals in Biblical Law*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 140 (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1993); Tova L. Forti, "Animal Images in the Didactic Rhetoric of the Book of Proverbs," *Biblica* 77 (1996): 48–63; Gene M. Tucker, "The Peaceable Kingdom and a Covenant with the Wild Animals," in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, ed. William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 215–25 (on Isa 11 and Hos 2); Katharine J. Dell, "The Use of Animal Imagery in the Psalms and Wisdom Literature of Ancient Israel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53 (2000): 275–91, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600050997; John Dominic

A new and promising trajectory in the study of the Hebrew Bible's animals is the recent push to investigate them through the various lenses of animal studies, especially in its more poststructuralist and posthumanist guises.[90] When mid- and late-twentieth-century studies began to include *Homo sapiens* in their accounts of biblical animals, they typically did so through traditional historical-critical approaches that leave unquestioned the basic division between humanity on the one hand and every other animal species on the other. Scholars informed by animal studies, however, drawing both on new research in zoology and on posthumanist and poststructuralist theory,[91] destabilize this

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Crossan, "The Power of the Dog," in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 187–93; Tova L. Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 118 (Boston: Brill, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004162877.i-196; Richard Whitekettle, "Forensic Zoology: Animal Taxonomy and Rhetorical Persuasion in Psalm l," *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 404–19, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853308X312672; Kenneth C. Way, "Animals in the Prophetic World: Literary Reflections on Numbers 22 and 1 Kings 13," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34 (2009): 47–62, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089209346353; Benjamin A. Foreman, *Animal Metaphors and the People of Israel in the Book of Jeremiah* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); David H. Wenkel, "Wild Beasts in the Prophecy of Isaiah: The Loss of Dominion and Its Renewal through Israel as the New Humanity," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5 (2011): 251–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/26421427; Brian R. Doak, *Consider Leviathan: Narratives of Nature and the Self in Job* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); and Peter Joshua Atkins, "Mythology or Zoology: A Study on the Impact of Translation History in Isaiah 13:21," *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016): 48–59, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00241p04.

[90] See the articles Ken Stone, "The Ostrich Leaves Her Eggs to the Earth: Queer Animals of God in the Book of Job," in *Reading Ideologies: Essays on the Bible and Interpretation in Honor of Mary Ann Tolbert*, ed. Tat-siong Benny Liew, The Bible in the Modern World 40 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), 316–31; Ken Stone, "Jackals and Ostriches Honoring God: The Zoological Gaze in the Isaiah Scroll," in *Focusing Biblical Studies: The Crucial Nature of the Persian and Hellenistic Periods: Essays in Honor of Douglas A. Knight*, ed. Jon L. Berquist and Alice Hunt, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 544 (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 63–80; Ken Stone, "Animating the Bible's Animals," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 444–55, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199967728.013.38; and Ken Stone, "Animal Difference, Sexual Difference, and the Daughter of Jephthah," *Biblical Interpretation* 24 (2016): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00241p01; and the edited volumes Stephen D. Moore, ed., *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Jennifer L. Koosed, ed., *The Bible and Posthumanism*, Semeia Studies 74 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014); and Arthur W. Walker-Jones and Suzanna R. Miller, eds. *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic*, Semeia Studies 104 (Atlanta: SBL, 2024).

[91] Particularly important contributions that can be considered within the field of animal studies include Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804767064; Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003); Wolfe,

hierarchical human-animal binary, showing the overlaps and complications that the presence of these beings in the biblical material offers. Frequently in these readings, nonhuman animals are figured as religious subjects rather than simply passive objects, and these interpretations also highlight passages in the Hebrew Bible where Yahweh's concern for earth's creatures extends beyond humans to nonhuman animals as well.

Two scholars have brought some of the insights of animal studies to bear on the Song of Songs.[92] First, Hannah Strømmen identifies the scholarly consensus around the Song as having a "focus on human love," but she goes on to ask, "[W]hat about non-divine, nonhuman aspects of this poetry?"[93] To investigate this question, Strømmen "put[s] the animal imagery centre stage,"[94] reading the Song's animal imagery alongside the poetry of Marianne Moore and Ted Hughes. She draws initially on Jacques Derrida's account of the "gap between human and animal, but also between every human—a gap which can be explored in poetry"[95] and proceeds to show how this separation is challenged in the poetry of the Song, Moore, and Hughes. She finds that

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Animal Rites; Cary Wolfe, ed., *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Posthumanities 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); and Calarco, *Thinking through Animals*. Haraway draws specifically on primatology and canine research, as well as poststructuralist philosophy and her own experience with dogs, and Wolfe and Calarco use poststructuralist philosophers like Agamben and Derrida to challenge traditional notions of animality and humanity.

[92] In addition to the two articles explored here, see also the discussion of animal imagery in Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, Studies in Biblical Literature 96 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 141–60, as well as Meyer, "Gregory of Nyssa and Jacques Derrida," who analyzes the animals in Gregory of Nyssa's reading of the Song of Songs.

[93] Hannah M. Strømmen, "Animal Poetics: Marianne Moore, Ted Hughes and the Song of Songs," *Literature and Theology* 31 (2017): 405–19, https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frx029, here 406.

[94] Strømmen, "Animal Poetics," 406.

[95] Strømmen, "Animal Poetics," 409.

> the boundary erected to separate humans as something other from animals is broken down in the imagery of the Song and the two lovers are conveyed as animals, not in a denigrated sense, as “mere” animals, but in a celebration of the richness and multiplicity of a shared world between humans and animals, or a world where humans too are animals.[96]

Second, Yvonne Sophie Thöne looks at “humanimality” in the Song, examining its animal-related poetry alongside ANE iconography. She pays particular attention to the horse metaphor of 1:9, which shows the value of the mare/woman but also her domination, and to the dove metaphor of 2:14, which shows the liberty of the dove/woman. As a result, Thöne notices “a strong appreciation not only of the woman, but also of animals in the Song of Songs,” but this appreciation differs along the lines of species and gender.[97]

Given how common nonhuman animal imagery is in the Song, and given how this imagery is used to represent humans, animal studies is certainly a valuable tool in understanding the poem. The Song could be said to assume already what scholars like these are now arguing—that the border between the categories of “human” and “animal” is complicated and porous. Descriptions of human body parts invoke nonhuman animals (e.g., eyes [1:15; 4:1; 5:12], hair [4:1; 5:11; 6:5], teeth [4:2; 6:6], and breasts [4:5; 7:4]), and indeed whole persons are figured as other than human (e.g., 1:9; 2:8–9, 14, 16–17; 5:2; 6:9; 8:14). More traditional accounts of the Song have assumed that this imagery is purely decorative and needs only to be decoded to uncover the human meaning beneath the metaphor, but a reading informed by animal studies can ask deeper questions of this

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[96] Strømmen, “Animal Poetics,” 414.

[97] Thöne, “Female Humanimality,” 405.

imagery.

As a result, this dissertation builds on this prior research to apply the critical lens of animal studies to the Song of Songs. Aaron Gross has highlighted the significance of "a multifaceted, critical 'animal hermeneutics'"[98]—or, perhaps, a *furmeneutics*, if you will. Gross's "animal hermeneutics" acknowledges and examines how "*humans imagine themselves through animal others*,"[99] and I follow Ken Stone in bringing this perspective to bear on the Hebrew Bible.[100] My furmeneutical approach to the Song will ask multiple questions about animality and humanity in the book: How does the author construct human and nonhuman animals as similar or different? Where does the human end and the animal begin? What ethical questions arise when using nonhuman animals to describe a human? a man? a woman? a lover? If the Song is truly "about" human sexuality, wherefore all these other creatures? Animal studies thus can be an important conversation partner in examining the Song's animals.[101]

To reiterate, my main argument here consists of two primary points. First, human sexuality in the Song is not a sui generis phenomenon but rather a subset of animal sexuality, which allows this domain of sexuality, a domain shared between humans and

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[98] Aaron S. Gross, "Introduction and Overview: Animal Others and Animal Studies," in *Animals and the Human Imagination: A Companion to Animal Studies*, ed. Aaron S. Gross and Anne Vallely (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

[99] Gross, "Introduction and Overview," 5, italics original.

[100] Ken Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 24.

[101] Though a full discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will state that my initial interest in the topic of animals in biblical love poetry stems from my own participation in the furry fandom. For members of the furry community, the boundaries between human and animal are intentionally and joyfully blurred, and furry art and practice also can include an erotic aspect (though it does not have to). For more info, see Jessica Ruth Austin, *Fan Identities in the Furry Fandom* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

nonhumans, to be productively explored. Whereas Davidson protests that "[t]he love between man and woman is not just animal passion, or evolved natural attraction, but a holy love ignited by Yahweh himself," I counter that this book that scarcely mentions Yahweh *is indeed* about animal passion.[102] Second, I note that the Song does not shy away from this erotic proximity between humans and animals; instead, the ambiguity of the boundary between species in this poem can pose a challenge to the species hierarchies that hurt both humans and nonhumans.

Chapter Summaries

My furmeneutical discussion of the Song will play out across five body chapters. Following the foregoing introduction to my argument in this first chapter, chapter 2, "Dramatis Animalia," sets the stage by outlining each of the nonhuman animals mentioned in the Song as well as the current scholarly trajectories in explaining the presence of those animals.

Having set up my argument and introduced all of our animal characters, chapters 3–6 will then examine specific animals in more detail and in conversation with animal studies. Chapter 3, "G(r)azing: Seeing and Being Animal," covers the wild herbivores of the Song. The love poetry of the Song of Songs is replete with descriptions of each lover's appearance and of the act of looking itself. This chapter will undertake a close reading of the gazes involved in the gazelle/deer metaphor, reading these metaphors alongside recent visual artwork and keeping the discourse of the species in mind. Here, I

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[102] Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 630.

will show how the woman of the Song imagines her lover as a gazelle/deer. Next, as the animalized lover looks from behind the wall at her in return (2:9), and I examine this animal's gaze alongside Jacques Derrida's insights about his gazing cat in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

Chapter 4, "The Pasture and the Battlefield: Domestic Mammals in the Song of Songs," turns to the goats/sheep and horses of the poem. Drawing on Donna Haraway, I show that these creatures are companion species with humans, each influencing the other across the complexities of domestication.

Chapter 5, "Sex and Danger: Predators in the Song," addresses the fox, lion, and leopard, the three predators mentioned in the Song. Here I draw on Val Plumwood's own encounter with a predator, which greatly affected her philosophical outlook following the event. At the same time, given my focus on sexuality in the Song, I take a leap from Plumwood's misreading of a pornographic film in order to explore the seductive appeal of domination in the Song and its commentators.

Chapter 6, "Dividing and Uniting with the Birds of the Song," covers the avian metaphors used in the Song. Using work from Giorgio Agamben and Ken Stone, I explore the proliferating lines that divide species internally and separate one species from another. Significantly, however, some of these lines draw the lovers closer to one another, connecting them via their use of avian imagery.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation with a summary of my argument as well as some ethical reflections on how the blurring of species lines in the Song may prompt us to think differently about our nonhuman others.

CHAPTER 2: DRAMATIS ANIMALIA

This chapter provides an account of the nonhuman animals of the Song, with two primary goals. First, it will outline some of the philological and zoological basics of every nonhuman animal that is mentioned in the Song, including the Hebrew words used to refer to them, the English translation(s) and taxonomic classification(s), and the verses in which each animal is mentioned. Second, this chapter will summarize how these animals have been read in their contexts by previous scholars. The purpose of this account of the Song's animals and scholars' views of them is not meant to be an exhaustive discussion; rather, I will aim here to provide an overview before delving into specific issues and passages in the rest of the dissertation.

An complete account of creatures from kingdom Animalia that are associated with the Song is impossible, so I have included in this discussion only those nonhuman animals that are explicitly mentioned in the text of the Song. The signs of animals' presence do not stop with mere mentions, however, and I could go further. We see animals' footprints throughout the text in the products they create themselves, such as the "honey" (4:11), "honeycomb" (5:1), and the wax "seal" (8:6) made by bees, and in the products created by humans, such as the red dye made from the dried exoskeletons of kermes insects (4:3), the costly purple dye made from the murex snail (3:10; 7:6), and the ivory of elephant tusks (7:5). And we could go further still: not included here are the various nonhuman animals required for the Song's rich floral imagery (e.g., pollinating insects as well as the birds and mammals that transport seeds via ingestion and

evacuation or via seeds sticking to fur); the possible reference to lice in 1:7;[1] the unnamed animals' fur and hides that make the characters' clothing, furniture, and dwellings; the animal flesh that the characters may consume in their "house of wine" (2:4; "banqueting house" NRSVue) when they're not eating "raisins" and "apples" (2:5); the working animals used to plant and maintain the Song's vineyards, gardens, and orchards; the working animals used to transport the Song's various goods (e.g., spices, precious metals, jewels, ivory, wood) to and within Palestine; and animals used in the material production of the document itself (animal skins required to make the parchment on which the poem was recorded and passed on as well as fur or feathers to make the brushes or quills used to write the text)—not to mention the unnamed and uncredited work by human animals required for the Song's explicit or implicit agriculture, trade, mining, metalworking, textiles, construction, midwifery, warfare, and textual production. The Song of Songs, like everything else, is the result of a vast web of interconnected animal life, labor, and death.

Horse

Hebrew	**English**	**taxonomic name**	**references**
סוּסָה	horse	*Equus ferus* (or *Equus caballus*)[2]	1:9

[1] J. A. Emerton, "Lice or a Veil in the Song of Songs 1.7?", in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, ed. A. Graeme Auld, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 152 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 127–40, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004283411_021, but see also Cheryl Exum's disagreement in *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 107–8.

[2] Deb Bennett and Robert S. Hoffmann, "Equus caballus," *Mammalian Species* 628 (1999): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504442.

לְסֻסָתִי֙ בְּרִכְבֵ֣י פַרְעֹ֔ה To a mare[3] among the chariots of Pharaoh
דִּמִּיתִ֖יךְ רַעְיָתִֽי׃ I compare you, my lover. (1:9)

The horse appears in a single verse in the Song (1:9), though its presence is also implied

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[3] There are two major issues that translators face when rendering the word לְסוּסָתִי into English. First is the issue of whether סוּסָה refers to a collective of horses (translated as something like "cavalry") or to a singular horse (thus translated "mare"). The Vulgate appears to start the trend of reading the word as "cavalry," as it uses *equitatui* here. A few others have provided similar renderings: see, e.g., Rashi; Rambam; Wycliffe ("oost" ["host"]); Luther (*Gespann*); KJV ("company of horses"); Wilhelm Wittekindt, *Das Hohe Lied und seine Beziehungen zum Ištarkult* (Hannover: Orient-Buchhandlung, 1926), 28 (*Gespann*); Athanasius Miller, *Das Hohe Lied*, Die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testamentes 6.3 (Bonn: Hanstein, 1927), 28 (*Rossegespann*). (Cf. also E. W. Hengstenberg, *Das Hohelied Salomonis* [Berlin: Ludwig Oehmigke, 1853], 24, who reads לְסוּסָתִי as a plural.) It must be said, however, that the vast majority of commentators interpret סוּסָה as a singular mare, and I have followed that reading here as well.

The other major translation issue in this verse regards the proper translation of the ִי– suffix appended to סוּסָה and is a matter of much more debate. First, the oldest tradition appears to read the suffix as a first-person pronominal suffix, thus translating לְסוּסָתִי as "to my mare." The Septuagint (Τῇ ἵππῳ μου), Vulgate (*equitatui meo*), and Syriac (ܠܣܘܣܬܝ) take this route, as do many more from across the centuries: Wycliffe ("myn oost"); Luther (*meinem Gespann*); Johann Gottfried Herder, *Lieder der Liebe: Die älteste und schönste aus dem Morgenlande* (Leipzig: Wengandschen Buchhandlung, 1778), 14 (*Meinem Roß*); Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs, Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), 137; Ernest Renan, *Le Cantique des Cantiques: Traduit de l'hébreu avec une étude sur le plan, l'age, et caractère du poëme* (Paris: Michel-Lévy Frères, 1860), 153; Samuel Oettli, "Das Hohelied und die Klagelieder," in *Die poetischen Hagiographen (Buch Hiob, Prediger Salomo, Hohelied und Klagelieder)*, Kurzgefaßter Kommentar zu den heiligen Schriften Alten und Neuen Testamentes 7 (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck'schen Buchhandlung, 1889), 173; Andrew Harper, *The Song of Solomon with Introduction and Notes*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 5; André Robert and Raymond Jacques Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques: Traduction et commentaire* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1963), 82; Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), 51, 144 ("a mare, my very own"); Luis Stadelman, *Love and Politics: A New Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New York: Paulist, 1992), 37, 43; Daniel J. Estes, "The Song of Songs," in *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2010), 310; Robert Alter, "The Song of Songs," in *Strong as Death is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton & Co., 2015), 10–11.

Second, a more recent but no less significant interpretation has read the ִי– suffix as an older genitive form called a *hireq compaginis* (see GKC §90k–o). As the Song is elevated language, the author may have felt free to use this form for poetic effect. For advocates of this view, see Heinrich Hirsch Graetz, *Schir Ha-Schirim/*שיר השירים *oder das Salomonische Hohelied übersetz und kritisch erläutert* (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1871), 132; Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton, Clark's Foreign Theological Library 4/54 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 33; Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Neukirchener, 1965), 105; Daniel Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création: Commentaire du Cantique des Cantiques*, Lectio Divina 51 (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 82–83; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7C (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 338; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb936wk, 131; Elie Assis, *Flashes of Fire: A Literary Analysis of the Song of Songs*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 503 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 55 n. 6; Duane

by the mention of chariots in 6:12.[4] Horses throughout the Hebrew Bible are associated with speed (Jer 4:13; 12:5; Ps 147:10; Hab 1:8; cf. Job 39:18; Isa 30:15–16; Hosea 14:4; Ps 33:17; Isa 31:1, 3; Micah 5:9; Amos 2:15; Prov 21:31), a faculty which, combined with their strength, makes them ideal for use in war (Exod 15:1, 21; Isa 2:7; 31:1; Jer 46:9; Job 39:18–25; Ps 20:8; Jer 6:23; 50:42; Amos 4:10; Nahum 3:2; Prov 21:31; Ezek 38:4, 14; 39:20; Zech 10:3).[5] Whereas the ox was used in ancient Palestine for agricultural purposes and the donkey for transportation, the horse's primary use was in pulling chariots, most notably in warfare.[6] One significant interpretation regarding its use in warfare will be explored shortly.

A. Garrett, "Song of Songs," in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 388 n. 21; Yair Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 127; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 99; Duane A. Garrett, "The Song of Songs," in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 144–45; Michael Fishbane, *Song of Songs: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1d989qb, 42; Gault, *Body As Landscape, Love As Intoxication*, 97 n. 41. The majority of modern Bible translations take this view as well (e.g., CEB, NJPS, NRSVue).

In my own translation above, I have taken the *hireq compaginis* view (thus "to a mare" rather than "to my mare") because the pronominal ending makes much less sense here, but it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to solve this dilemma here, so this is not a stance I hold with unwavering conviction. Scholars will likely continue to disagree on this issue for some time.

[4] This chapter does not treat Song 6:12 because it does not explicitly mention horses, and therefore most commentators have little to say about horses with regard to this verse. One notable exception is Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 36 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 51, who retrieves the mare metaphor from 1:9 in order to elucidate 6:12:

> When first he saw her, the king compared the princess to his mare in the chariots (*rik^{e}bê*) of Pharaoh (1.9): now, she says, he has made her a chariot of her own people that is, she is still the mare, but he is now the "charioteer". The Hebrews had thus already discovered that sexual union could take place in more than one position.

[5] James A. Rimbach, "Animal Imagery in the Old Testament" (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1972), 146–48.

[6] Edwin Firmage, "Zoology (Fauna)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1109–67, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261929-801, here 1136.

Song 1:9 associates this "mare" with Pharaoh and therefore with Egypt in some way. Elie Assis takes the reference to Egypt as a marker of distance: "the remote-sounding image complies with the sense of distance or alienation that the man expresses in his words."[7] Most readers, however, highlight in various ways the particular association that exists between horses, Egypt, and Solomon. Egypt's military might, for instance, is frequently associated with its use of horses (Deut 17:16; 20:1; 2 Kgs 7:6; Isa 31:1; Ezek 17:15). The importance of horses to Egypt's military power is probably enough to explain the mention of Pharaoh here,[8] but many commentators find a further connection. Franz Delitzsch in his commentary mentions Solomon's importation of horses from Egypt to Israel (1 Kgs 10:28–29; 2 Chr 1:16–17; 9:28), and Michael Goulder suggests that the "chariots of Pharaoh" here are not those owned by Pharaoh but rather those bought from Pharaoh by Solomon.[9] In this interpretation, the Song has a further connection to Solomon as both purchaser and poet—they become relevant to the poem not merely because they exist elsewhere but also because Solomon himself brought them there. In the unlikely event that, as tradition suggests, Solomon wrote the Song, he would be most qualified to reference the beauty of his own horses. One final reason for the appearance of "Pharaoh" here is the relation between the Song and ancient Egyptian love poetry; perhaps, for instance, it would be natural to mention the Egyptian ruler in this

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[7] Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 54.

[8] Arnold B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel: Textkritisches, sprachliches und sachliches* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1908–1914), 7:4; Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 63–64.

[9] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 32–33; Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 17; see also Renan, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 153; Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 145; Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*, trans. Michael Tait, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 144 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004203259.i-542, 72 n. 112.

poem if it draws directly on Egyptian literary forms.[10]

Most scholars read this equine metaphor in one of two ways: either as a reference to the woman's appearance or as a reference to a unique military defensive strategy. Scholars who highlight the woman's appearance here cite a number of bases for this interpretation. For instance, Christian Ginsburg approvingly cites an anonymous medieval Jewish commentary that attributes the equine comparison to the woman's "dark complexion" mentioned in 1:5–6.[11] The implication is not that all horses are dark but rather that this particular horse's "dark colour renders it more beautiful than the other horses" and thus that the woman herself is equally beautiful.[12] Others rely not on color but shape to describe this compliment to the woman's appearance, usually with a hefty dose of orientalism to boot. Robert Gordis observes that "[t]he ancients liked their women large," and this horse imagery supports his contention that "this taste for an ample woman reflected the emphasis upon child-bearing as woman's chief task."[13] Daniel Lys cites Gordis approvingly, adding that this depiction of the woman "is for the Oriental based on the large feminine ideal of hips for giving birth well."[14] This notion is

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[10] John G. Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 21.

[11] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 136. The commentary he cites was later published in H. J. Mathews, "Anonymous Commentary on the Song of Songs," in *Festschrift zum achtzigsten Geburtstage Moritz Steinschneider's* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1896), 238–40 (English) and 164–85 (Hebrew).

[12] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 136.

[13] Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 20 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1954), 40–41.

[14] "La comparaison avec une jument surprend l'Occidental, dont les images amoureuses utilîsent des animaux de moindre volume; mais elle est pour l'Oriental fondée sur l'idéal féminin large de hanches pour bien enfanter" (Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création*, 82). He cites Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological

not without pushback; Gianni Barbiero explicitly disagrees with Lys, and Goulder calls Lys's view "really too unromantic."[15] Perhaps, as Helmer Ringgren suggests, the image is meant to convey a more general sense of the woman's "highest physical perfection" (*höchster körperlicher Vollkommenheit*).[16]

If not strictly physical description, perhaps the beauty of the mare may lie in her proximity to royalty. Samuel Oettli observes that in the man's eyes, "[t]he girl appears to him not only with natural grace but with noble pride."[17] The horse comparison is an expression of her "stateliness" and "proud appearance,"[18] her "beauty and stately character."[19] The woman is like a mare in that she is worthy of being "the cherished companion of kings and nobles,"[20] so the man honors her by comparing her to this "very valuable, impressive and noble animal."[21] Beyond her stately nobility, her nearness to

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Seminary of America 20 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1954), 40, approvingly.

[15] Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*, trans. Michael Tait, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 144 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 71 n. 106; Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 17.

[16] Helmer Ringgren, "Das Hohe Lied," in *Das Hohe Lied/Klagelieder/Das Buch Esther*, Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 262.

[17] "Das Mädchen tritt ihm offenbar nicht nur mit natürl[ich] Anmut, sondern mit edlem Stolze entgegen" (Oettli, "Das Hohelied und die Klagelieder," 173). Cf. also the meaning "thoroughbred" (of a horse) for *edel.*

[18] "Der Vergleich bezieht sich besonders auf die Stattlichkeit des Wuchses und die stolze Erscheinung der Geliebten" (D. C. Siegfried, *Prediger und Hoheslied übersetzt und erklärt*, ed. D. W. Nowack, Handkommentar zum Alten Testament vol. 3, part 2 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898], 97).

[19] "Tertium comparationis scheint in den ägyptischen Liedern die Schnelligkeit zu sein, während der Vergleich im Hohenlied wie bei den Griechen vor allem die Schönheit und den herrschaftlichen Charakter des Pferdes ins Gedächtnis ruft" (Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, 107). He cites Egyptian and Greek songs as parallels.

[20] Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ktav, 1974), 48.

[21] Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 53–54; see also Lawrence R. Farley, *The Song of Songs: Textual Commentary and Theological Reflections* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 40.

Pharaoh affords her the opportunity to be decorated in "the splendid ornaments and collars with which kings used to decorate horses."[22] A number of scholars—perhaps the majority—draw on the ornaments mentioned in the next two verses (תֹּרִים, 1:10–11) to explain the appeal of the mare metaphor, so that it is not her horsiness that makes her beautiful but rather the "precious adornments" that make her "resplendent in her finery."[23] In the man's loving eyes, the woman is as beautiful as a horse of royal breeding, bedazzling in her jewelry.

The notable alternative to these readings that focus on the woman's appearance is the military defense reading, which Marvin Pope originated in a journal article and later repeated in his Anchor Bible volume on the Song.[24] In Pope's view, it is odd that the

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[22] "Nobis illa comparatio ad splendidas phaleras et torques, quibus regum equi ornari solebant, reserenda videtur. Laudatur enim Versu proximo genarum sponsae ornatus" (Ernst Friedrich Karl Rosenmüller, *Salomonis regis et sapientis quae perhibentur scripta, vol. 2: Ecclesiasten et Canticum*, Scholia in Vetus Testamentum part 9 [Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1830], 314).

[23] Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature 13 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 108–9; cf. also Walter F. Adeney, *The Song of Solomon and the Lamentations of Jeremiah*, The Expositor's Bible 20 (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1895), 18; Paul Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques: Commentaire philologique et exégétique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1909), 139–40; Leroy Waterman, *The Song of Songs: Translated and Interpreted as a Dramatic Poem* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1948), 71–72; Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 48; Theophile J. Meek, Hugh Thomson Kerr, and Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr., "The Song of Songs," in *The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 5: Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah, Jeremiah*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 108; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth/Das Hohe Lied/Die Klagelieder*, Kommentar zum Alten Testament 17 (Stuttgart: Gütersloh, 1962), 127; Yehuda Feliks, *Song of Songs: Nature Epic and Allegory* (Jerusalem: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1983), 44; Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 105; Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 17; Mary Timothea Elliott, *The Literary Unity of the Canticle* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), 55–56; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 131, 134; Garrett, "Song of Songs," 388; Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, 21; Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 145–46; Nicholas Ayo, *Sacred Marriage: The Wisdom of the Song of Songs* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 85–86; Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 144; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 108–9; Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 71; Fishbane, *Song of Songs*, 42; Edwin M. Good, *The Song of Songs: Codes of Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 53–54; Tod Linafelt, "Structure, Sound, and Sense: A Close Reading of Chapter One of the Song of Songs," in *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, ed. J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 124–25.

[24] Marvin H. Pope, "A Mare in Pharaoh's Chariotry," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 200 (1970): 56–61, https://doi.org/10.2307/1356179; *Song of Songs*, 338–40.

singular “mare” (לְסֻסָתִי) in this verse should be pulling the plural “chariots” (בְּרִכְבֵי)—are we to assume that one lone horse is managing the load of two or more chariots? Indeed, Pope argues that the historical reality of chariot usage was the opposite—it was not one but at least two horses that pulled a single chariot, and these horses were stallions, not mares.[25] If this is true, then the reader must determine why the Song would mention a mare among Pharaoh’s chariots. Pope’s solution is that the mare isn’t pulling the chariots at all but rather acting as a distraction to the stallions who are pulling them:

> The situation envisaged is illustrated by the famous incident[26] in one of the campaigns of Thutmose III against Qadesh. On his tomb at Thebes, the Egyptian soldier Amenemheb relates how the Prince of Qadesh sent forth a swift mare which entered among the army. But Amenemheb ran after her on foot and with his dagger ripped open her belly, cut off her tail, and presented it to the king, thus preventing a debacle before the excited stallions could take out after the mare.[27]

In support of this view, Pope cites various Jewish commentaries that depict the stallions of the Egyptians following a mare into the Red Sea to their doom, either metaphorically or literally. In Song of Songs Rabbah, the Israelites are enticing, just like mares, so the Egyptians pursue them like stallions.[28] For others, God caused the Egyptians’ stallions to

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[25] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 338. He does not cite the source of this claim but calls it “well-attested fact.”

[26] Pope cites this incident from James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906–1907), 2:233; George Steindorff and Keith C. Seele, *When Egypt Ruled the East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 58. It is also published in *ANET*, 241.

[27] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 338.

[28] Maurice Simon has this translation in *Midrash Rabbah: Song of Songs* (London: Soncino, 1939), 71:

> Another explanation: I have compared thee, O my love, etc. The Rabbis say: [The expression ‘mares’ is used] because the Israelites appeared like mares and the wicked Egyptians who pursued them were like stallions eager with desire, and they ran after them until they were sunk in the sea. (Song of Songs Rabbah 1.9.6)

See also the translation in Jacob Neusner, *Song of Songs Rabbah: An Analytical Translation,* vol. 1: *Song of Songs Rabbah to Song Chapters One through Three*, Brown Judaic Studies 197 (Atlanta: Scholars Press,

see a mare, leading to the ultimate fate of those horses and the Egyptians with them.[29] From these examples, Pope concludes, "It is thus clear that some of the rabbis were aware that the Egyptians, like other peoples, used male horses for war and were familiar with the excitement that could be caused by the scent or presence of an estrual mare."[30] Indeed, Pope cites a tale from Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 3.85, which tells of Darius becoming king of Persia through a plot involving the use of a mare's scent to arouse his stallion. For horses, the effect of a female on a male is apparently well known. As a result, Pope's reading of the Song's equine metaphor is this: in the same way that a mare might drive a stallion wild with her allure (and her pheromones), so also is the man of the Song driven wild by his human lover, even to a distracting or disruptive extent.

Pope's argument has persuaded a number of scholars. For instance, Robert Alter

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1989):

> A. Another explanation of the verse, "I compare you, my love, to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots":
> B. Rabbis say, "Since the Israelites were like mares and the wicked Egyptians like males in heat,
> C. "they ran after them until they sunk down in the sea." (Song of Songs Rabbah 1.9.2.2A–C)

[29] See *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan*, trans. Judah Goldin, Yale Judaica Series 10 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), 113–14:

> Rabbi Joshua ben Korḥah says: When Pharaoh came into the sea, he came on a stallion, and the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to it as on a mare, as it is said, *To My mare amongst Pharaoh's chariots* (Cant. 1:9).—But did He not ride rather on a cherub, as it is said, *And He rode upon a cherub, and did fly; yea, He did swoop down upon the wings of the wind* (Ps. 18:11)? In that event say: The cherub appeared to the horses of Pharaoh as a mare, and they all came into the sea. (Avot of Rabbi Nathan 27)

See also *Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great)*, trans. Gerald Friedlander (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1916), 331:

> The Egyptians desired to follow after Israel, but they turned backwards, fearing lest the waters would return over them. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He appeared before them like a man riding on the back of a mare, as it is said, "To a steed in Pharaoh's chariots" (Cant. i. 9). The horse on which Pharaoh rode saw the mare (of God), and it neighed and ran and entered the sea after it. (Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 42)

[30] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 339.

agrees with this reading, and Huwiler notes that this is the first usage of military imagery to describe the woman.[31] Marcia Falk explains that "the point of the image is not simply that the beloved is as beautiful as a regal horse, as most translations suggest, but that she is as tempting, as distracting, even as dangerous, as the presence of a single mare among many stallions."[32] But Pope is also not without his detractors. Edwin Good, for his part, sees this military strategy interpretation as an overreading, as "nothing in the rest of the poem remotely suggests that disruption is any part of what is going on."[33] For others, the proximity of vv. 10–11, which mention the woman's ornamentation, makes for a much better explanation of the mare metaphor.[34] Yet more scholars tread the line between these two trends, highlighting both the woman's appearance and her distracting effect on the man.[35]

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[31] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 193; Elizabeth Huwiler, "The Song of Songs," in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New International Biblical Commentary 12 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 252–53.

[32] Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 170. See also André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 77–78; Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 103; Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 247; Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 127–28.

[33] Good, *The Song of Songs*, 53.

[34] Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, 21; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 105.

[35] Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 56–58; Renita J. Weems, "The Song of Songs," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 386–87; Dianne Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 19; Gault, *Body As Landscape, Love As Intoxication*, 97–102.

Gazelle and Deer

Hebrew	English	taxonomic name	references
צְבִיָּה	gazelle	*Gazella dorcas, Gazella gazella,* or *Gazella subgutturosa*[36]	2:7; 3:5; 4:5; 7:4
צְבִי			2:9, 17; 8:14
אַיָּלָה	roe deer or fallow deer	*Capreolus capreolus* or *Dama dama mesopotamica*	2:7; 3:5
אַיִל			2:9, 17; 8:14
עֹפֶר	gazelle/deer fawn	*Gazella dorcas, Gazella gazella, Gazella subgutturosa, Capreolus capreolus*, or *Dama dama mesopotamica*	2:9, 17; 4:5; 7:4; 8:14

Swearing by the Gazelles and Does (2:7; 3:5)

הִשְׁבַּ֨עְתִּי אֶתְכֶ֜ם I adjure you,
בְּנ֣וֹת יְרוּשָׁלִַ֗ם Daughters of Jerusalem,
בִּצְבָא֔וֹת א֖וֹ בְּאַיְל֣וֹת הַשָּׂדֶ֑ה By the gazelles or the does of the field,
אִם־תָּעִ֧ירוּ ׀ וְֽאִם־תְּעוֹרְר֛וּ Do not arouse and do not stir up
אֶת־הָאַהֲבָ֖ה עַ֥ד שֶׁתֶּחְפָּֽץ׃ Love until it desires. (2:7; 3:5)

The first mention of gazelles and deer appears in a mysterious oath formula in 2:7, repeated verbatim in 3:5 and again in an abbreviated form in 8:4, though without the gazelles and deer present there. The “daughters of Jerusalem” are enjoined by the poetic speaker in this oath not to “arouse” or “stir up love until it desires.” There is no consensus on what precisely this admonition against arousing love might mean. In a survey article on this verse, Brian Gault lists no fewer than eight possible interpretations that scholars have offered over the years, including that the daughters should not wake up the woman, that they should avoid aphrodisiacs, or that they should be wary of love’s potential

[36] Firmage, “Zoology (Fauna),” 6:1141; Natan Slifkin, Chayot*/Wild Animals*, vol. 1 of *The Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom, the Samson Edition* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015), 243.

deleterious effects.[37] The last two options Gault considers are the recent popular evangelical readings that sees this as a warning against pre-marital sex[38] and Gordis's suggestion that the speaker urges the daughters against interrupting the lovers' intimacy ("a 'do not disturb' sign").[39] Ultimately, the precise meaning of this admonition is not entirely necessary for understanding the animals mentioned here—indeed, they are omitted entirely from the third appearance of this oath formula in 8:4.

Whatever the meaning of this verse, what remains to be explained is how the gazelles and deer contribute to that meaning. Scholars have put forth two main explanations for these animals. First, the gazelle and deer are "animals symbolic of love,"[40] and so their presence in an admonition about love derives from their associations with love. Ginsburg says of the gazelle, "[F]rom its being charming and lovely, it also became an object by which to swear."[41] For Duane Garrett, "these graceful animals" symbolize "romance and sexuality."[42] Readers who see the Song as non-Jewish love rites highlight the connections these animals have to any given "goddess of love."[43] Besides

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[37] Brian P. Gault, "An Admonition against 'Rousing Love': The Meaning of the Enigmatic Refrain in Song of Songs," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20 (2010): 161–84, https://doi.org/10.2307/26424294.

[38] See, e.g., Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 155: "the exhortation can only mean that they should avoid promiscuity and save their virginity for marriage."

[39] Gault, "An Admonition against 'Rousing Love'"; see also Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 51; Brian P. Gault, "A 'Do Not Disturb' Sign? Reexamining the Adjuration Refrain in Song of Songs," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36 (2011): 93–104, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089211419412.

[40] James M. Reese, *The Book of Wisdom, Song of Songs*, Old Testament Message 20 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 221.

[41] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 143.

[42] Garrett, "Song of Songs," 393.

[43] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 92; see also Pope, *Song of Songs*, 386.

theological links to love, others note their biological links to love: for instance, for G. Lloyd Carr, the “least problematical” interpretation is that these are “two animals noted for their sexual potency.”[44] Scholars thus connect the dots to associate gazelles and deer with love in different ways, but the fact of this relation remains a common explanation for their presence in these verses.

The second major explanation for these animals is that they are substitutions for divine names. Specifically, צְבָאוֹת (“gazelles”) sounds identical to צְבָאוֹת (“armies” or “hosts”), which forms part of a common epithet for Yahweh (“Yahweh of hosts” appears 248 times in the MT). Furthermore, אַיְלוֹת הַשָּׂדֶה (“does of the field”) sounds quite similar to אֵל שַׁדַּי (“El Shaddai”), another name of the deity, appearing 10 times in the MT. The author may then be swearing by Yahweh without explicitly naming him. Gordis identifies this substitution as an instance of an “escape formula,” a careful way of making an oath without fully spelling it out, for fear of facing the consequences of not having fulfilled it. He cites examples from ancient Greek literature and Rabbinic literature and notes that this appears in modern languages as well: “In contemporary colloquial English, this phenomenon can be clearly observed. ‘Gosh darn’ does duty for ‘God damn,’ ‘Gee,’ for ‘Jesus,’ ‘Jiminy Crickets’ for ‘Jesus Christ,’ ‘Holy Cow’ for ‘Holy Christ,’ etc.”[45]

This view is perhaps bolstered by some ancient evidence: though the Vulgate and Syriac translate the verse literally with gazelles and does, the Septuagint on the other

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[44] G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 19 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 102; see once again Pope, *Song of Songs*, 386, who mentions Mesopotamian potency incantations’ use of stags (though not does).

[45] Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ktav, 1974), 27.

hand has ἐν ταῖς δυνάμεσιν καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἰσχύσεσιν τοῦ ἀγροῦ (“by the powers and by the mighty ones of the field”), which likely indicates an awareness of this wordplay with divine titles prior to the Common Era. The Targum has similar phrasing: בה׳ צבאות ובתקפי ארעא דישראל (“by the Lord of hosts and by the mighty ones of the Land of Israel”),[46] thus making the implicit allusion to the deity an explicit mention, and Song of Songs Rabbah 2:7 also explains “gazelles” with “hosts.” The NEB is the only modern English translation that yields a non-animal interpretation, glossing the relevant phrase as “by the spirits and goddesses of the field” and offering “by the gazelles and the hinds” as an alternative. This reading of the gazelles and deer in 2:7 and 3:5 is widely accepted among commentators.[47]

These two are not the only explanations for the appearance of these animals. For instance, Natan Slifkin argues, “The fact that gazelles and deer are used as objects of an oath indicates their value; one only swears upon very precious things.”[48] Renita Weems suggests that the phrase in question is “probably formulaic and common to those who dwelled in desert settings.”[49] Finally, Rashi holds that gazelles and does are the objects of the oath because they represent the result of a broken oath: שֶׁתִּהְיוּ הֶפְקֵר וּמַאֲכָל כִּצְבָיִים וְאַיָּלִים

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[46] Alexander, *The Targum of Canticles*, 103.

[47] Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 161; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 109–10; Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 20; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 133; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 119; Robert W. Jenson, *Song of Songs*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 31; George M. Schwab, “Song of Songs,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, 13 vols., rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005–2012), 386; Paul J. Griffiths, *Song of Songs*, Brazos Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011), 61–63; Good, *The Song of Songs*, 59–60.

[48] Slifkin, Chayot/*Wild Animals*, 245.

[49] Weems, “The Song of Songs,” 390.

("that you will be abandoned and preyed upon like gazelles and hinds").[50] However, the association of these animals with love has been one of the more dominant explanations, and the "escape formula" interpretation fits the evidence the best and so has more recently become the leading theory.

The Man as Gazelle or Deer (2:9, 17; 8:14)

קֹ֣ול דֹּודִ֔י	The voice of my beloved.
הִנֵּה־זֶ֖ה בָּ֑א	Behold, he comes,
מְדַלֵּג֙ עַל־הֶ֣הָרִ֔ים	Leaping over the mountains,
מְקַפֵּ֖ץ עַל־הַגְּבָעֹֽות׃	Bounding over the hills.
דֹּומֶ֤ה דֹודִי֙ לִצְבִ֔י אֹ֖ו לְעֹ֣פֶר הָֽאַיָּלִ֑ים	My beloved is like a gazelle or a fawn of the deer.
הִנֵּה־זֶ֤ה עֹומֵד֙ אַחַ֣ר כָּתְלֵ֔נוּ	Behold, he stands behind our wall,
מַשְׁגִּ֙יחַ֙ מִן־הַ֣חַלֹּנֹ֔ות	Gazing from the windows,
מֵצִ֖יץ מִן־הַחֲרַכִּֽים׃	Peering from the lattices. (2:8–9)
דֹּודִ֥י לִי֙ וַאֲנִ֣י לֹ֔ו	My beloved is mine and I am his,
הָרֹעֶ֖ה בַּשֹּׁושַׁנִּֽים׃	The one who grazes among the lotuses.[51]
עַ֤ד שֶׁיָּפ֙וּחַ֙ הַיֹּ֔ום	Until the day breathes
וְנָ֖סוּ הַצְּלָלִ֑ים	And the shadows flee,
סֹב֩ דְּמֵה־לְךָ֨ דֹודִ֜י לִצְבִ֗י	Turn and be, my beloved, like a gazelle,
אֹ֛ו לְעֹ֥פֶר הָאַיָּלִ֖ים עַל־הָ֥רֵי בָֽתֶר׃	Or a fawn of the deer on the cleft mountains. (2:16–17)
בְּרַ֣ח ׀ דֹּודִ֗י	Flee, my beloved,
וּֽדְמֵה־לְךָ֤ לִצְבִי֙	And be like a gazelle
אֹ֛ו לְעֹ֥פֶר הָֽאַיָּלִ֖ים	Or a fawn of the deer
עַ֖ל הָרֵ֥י בְשָׂמִֽים׃	On the mountains of spices. (8:14)

Gazelle and deer imagery appears again in the repeated similes the woman uses to portray her man, often as he is coming and going. The first instance is 2:8–9, in which the man approaches and peers at the woman through her window. The vast majority of scholars

[50] Avraham Davis, *The Metsudah Five Megillot* (Lakewood, NJ: Metsudah, 2001).

[51] W. Derek Suderman, "Modest or Magnificent: Lotus versus Lily in Canticles," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 42–58 argues convincingly that שׁוּשַׁן, which is traditionally translated "lily" in the Song, should be "lotus" instead. See also Hess, *Song of Songs*, 86; Estes, "The Song of Songs," 330; and Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 98.

take 2:7 to be the end of a poetic unit and 2:8 to be the beginning of a new one. The choice of animal references here in this new section may be influenced by the preceding section,[52] so a nice bridge is formed across the section break by this shared imagery. Scholars debate where this new section beginning in 2:8 ends, but the recurrence of the gazelle/deer simile in 2:16–17 forms a nice inclusio for this unit: "The section ends as it begins, in an image of sexual energy, with the man leaping upon mountains like a gazelle or young deer."[53] The final instance of this imagery appears in the final verse of the book (8:14), which again depicts the man as an ungulate traversing mountains. Whereas the gazelles and deer mentioned in 2:7 and 3:5 are grammatically feminine, due to the female speaker or the female addressees (the daughters of Jerusalem) or both, the gazelles and deer in 2:8–9, 17 and 8:14 are masculine, referring now to the man of the poem. The noun צְבִי-II ("gazelle") is most likely intended due to its appearance beside אַיָּל ("deer"), but it is homonymous with צְבִי-I ("beauty"), which may be a case of wordplay, attributing beauty to the man's gazelle-like movements.[54] In addition, the word עֹפֶר ("fawn") appears only in the Song—in these three mentions regarding the man and in the breast comparisons discussed below (2:9, 17; 4:5; 7:4; 8:14).

Perhaps the most obvious explanation for the gazelle and deer imagery in these verses is the movement of these animals, particularly their speed. They make a "course rapide […] sur les montagnes" ("rapid course over the mountains")[55] and are

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[52] Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 23.

[53] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 122.

[54] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 139.

[55] Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 163–64.

“leichtfüßiges” (“light-footed”)[56] as well as “swift-footed” and “nimble.”[57] They demonstrate “swiftness and agility”[58] and are among “the fastest of animals.”[59] This makes an apt comparison to describe a fast man, as the gazelle is used in the Hebrew Bible mostly as a symbol for speed—“usually, the most one sees of a gazelle is a flash of its white rump as it disappears into the distance.”[60] Asahel (2 Sam 2:18) and David’s Gadite warriors (1 Chr 12:9) are said to have the quickness of a gazelle. In addition, its fast movements are associated with the difficulty of hunting the animal, as in Isaiah 13:14 and possibly Proverbs 6:5.[61] The actual behavior of gazelles include not just quick movements but also vertical movements, as Slifkin notes:

> The description of gazelles leaping may refer to the high leaps of nearly eight feet that they sometimes take in the course of fleeing from predators.[62] Alternately, it may be a reference to a particular habit known as “stotting” or “pranking,” whereby gazelles bounce high into the air with all four legs simultaneously.[63]

Thus, the man’s approach toward the woman to the woman is fast and eager, and his movements are playful and energetic.

For a number of readers, these animals’ speed is not the only factor, as their

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[56] Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 148.

[57] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 145; see also S. M. Lehrman, “The Song of Songs,” in *The Five Megilloth: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, ed. A. Cohen, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino, 1959), 7.

[58] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 390.

[59] Hess, *Song of Songs*, 88.

[60] Slifkin, Chayot/*Wild Animals*, 244; see also Rimbach, “Animal Imagery in the Old Testament,” 144–45.

[61] Rimbach, “Animal Imagery in the Old Testament,” 145.

[62] Slifkin cites Heinrich Mendelssohn and Yoram Yom-Tov, *Fauna Palaestina: Mammalia of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1999), 256.

[63] Slifkin, Chayot/*Wild Animals*, 247.

sensuality is also highlighted in these verses. Their movements demonstrate "vigor and grace,"[64] and so are pleasing to look at, but the animals in question are known for their sexuality as well. Multiple commentators remark on "the power of [the stag's] erotic desire"[65] and "the power of the gazelle's sexual desire."[66] Readers often make reference to Mesopotamian literature that shares this association of gazelles and deer with sexuality.[67] These connections are especially apparent in 2:16's "grazing" and 2:17 and 8:14's "mountains."

In 2:16, the man "grazes among the lotuses" (or "lilies"; see n. 51 above), a verb that could be understood transitively (he grazes a flock) or more likely intransitively (he himself grazes): "The translation understands him to be feeding on the lilies, which presumably are a symbol for the woman herself."[68] If the poet imagines a particular action in this feeding, the identification is debatable. The oral nature of the "grazing" metaphor could indicate kissing,[69] or it could just as well refer to an oral act that occurs lower on the body, on a different sort of lips.[70] A precise identification is not necessary to

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[64] Garrett, "Song of Songs," 393.

[65] Gault, *Body As Landscape, Love As Intoxication*, 104.

[66] Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, 36; see also Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 112.

[67] See, e.g., Pope, *Song of Songs*, 409; Tom Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs: The Lyrics of Love*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 142.

[68] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 142. For a different perspective, see Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 33.

[69] Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 203 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 97; Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 123.

[70] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 406–7; M. L. Case, "Cunning Linguists: Oral Sex in the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 67 (2017): 171–86, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12341277.

understand the sensuality of the phrasing.[71]

The mountains of 2:17 and 8:14 may similarly point to the woman's own body as the man makes his way across it. In the former verse, these are הָרֵי בָתֶר, of which the word בָתֶר poses a particular challenge. Many translations simply transliterate it as a proper name, yielding *montes Bether* (Vulg.), "les montagnes de Bèter,"[72] "den Bether-Bergen,"[73] "den Bergen von Betar,"[74] or "the mountains of Bether."[75] However, we don't know of any mountains by this name, which would be otherwise unattested in the biblical corpus. Elsewhere, this Hebrew root בתר refers to dividing animals in half (Gen 15:10; Jer 34:18–19), so many translators see the mountains of Song 2:17 as divided mountains: ὄρη κοιλωμάτων ("mountains of valleys," LXX), "den Scheidebergen" (Luther), "des monts séparés,"[76] as well as in English mountains characterized as "rugged,"[77] "jagged,"[78] "cloven,"[79] or "cleft."[80] If, then, הָרֵי בָתֶר is "cleft mountains" or something

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[71] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 130–31.

[72] Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 114; see also Augustin Calmet, *Commentaire literal sur tous les livres de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament, vol. 5: L'Ecclésiaste, Le cantique des cantiques, La sagesse, L'ecclésiastique, et Isaie* (Paris: Emery, 1713), 2:90.

[73] Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, 126.

[74] Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 160.

[75] So KJV; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 85; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 111; Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron*, 24; Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 123–24; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 118–19; and Hess, *Song of Songs*, 86.

[76] Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création*, 125.

[77] RSV; TNIV; NIV 2011.

[78] CEB; Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 65.

[79] Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 98; Alter, "The Song of Songs," 18.

[80] NRSVue; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 4; Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 157; and Exum, *Song of Songs*, 120. See also Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 33.

similar, the poet may be referencing the mounds of the woman's breasts[81] or the separation that is her vulva.[82] Song 8:14 is very similar in wording, having the same gazelle and deer imagery but with the reading הָרֵי בְשָׂמִים ("mountains of spices") instead, which adds pleasing olfactory notes to the man's exploration of her body: "Her body is the 'mountains of spices' just as her body is the garden of delights, where the sweet airs are everywhere. […] She will show the way, and about her he will have running room to romp upon fragrant mountains above ample valleys."[83] As the woman calls the gazelle/deer to sojourn across this landscape, "[s]he is calling on him to make love to her."[84] As a result, the woman's imagery of grazing on lotuses and leaping across mountains work together, using these nonhuman animal references as ciphers for sexual acts.

The Woman's Breasts as Fawns (4:5; 7:4)

שְׁנֵי שָׁדַיִךְ כִּשְׁנֵי עֳפָרִים	Your two breasts are like two fawns,
תְּאוֹמֵי צְבִיָּה	Twins of a gazelle,
הָרוֹעִים בַּשּׁוֹשַׁנִּים׃	Grazing among the lotuses. (4:5)
שְׁנֵי שָׁדַיִךְ כִּשְׁנֵי עֳפָרִים	Your two breasts are like two fawns,
תָּאֳמֵי צְבִיָּה׃	Twins of a gazelle. (7:4)

The Song's final use of ungulate imagery appears in two nearly identical verses as parts of waṣfs, poems that lovingly and playfully describe parts of the body in order.[85] The first

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[81] Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 24.

[82] Paul Haupt, "Difficult Passages in the Song of Songs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 21 (1902): 51–73, https://doi.org/10.2307/3268856, here 69–70.

[83] Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 260–61.

[84] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 265.

[85] Soulen, "The *Waṣfs* of the Song of Songs and Hermeneutic"; Marcia Falk, "The Waṣf," in *The*

instance comes in chap. 4, which begins in v. 1 with the woman's hair, moves to her mouth in vv. 2–3, her neck in v. 4, and then her breasts in v. 5, continuing down from there. The second comes in chap. 7, which reverses the order, starting with the woman's feet and legs in v. 2, moving to her midsection in v. 3, and arriving at her breasts in v. 4, continuing upward in the following verses. These two verses are the same apart from 4:5's addition of a third colon, which I'll discuss below.

Roland Murphy summarizes the difficulties of these verses well: "The comparison made for her breasts suggests symmetry: תְּאוֹמֵ֣י ('twins'). Still, the point of the comparison is not obvious (color or form?)."[86] One of the most common observations from readers of these verses is the significance of the number of creatures mentioned: there are "two" (שְׁנֵי) and they are "twins" (תָּאֳמֵי), and this pairing correlates to the woman's two breasts, indicating their "perfect symmetry."[87] Yehuda Feliks claims that "the author stretches his poetic licence a little in speaking of 'the twins of a gazelle'; the gazelle-dam drops but a single fawn: it is the hind that drops twins."[88] The rarity of twins among *Gazella gazella* and *Gazella dorcas* is true,[89] but *Gazella subgutturosa* has been observed often having two or even more offspring.[90] Twins are indeed more common among one deer species in

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Song of Songs, ed. Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), 67-78; see also Athalya Brenner, "'Come Back, Come Back the Shulammite' (Song of Songs 7.1–10): A Parody of the *wasf* Genre," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner, The Feminist Companion to the Bible 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 234-57.

[86] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 155.

[87] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 470.

[88] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 12.

[89] Yoram Yom-Tov, Heinrich Mendelssohn, and Colin P. Groves, "Gazella dorcas," *Mammalian Species* 491 (1995): 1–6, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504254, here 4.

[90] Steven C. Kingswood and David A. Blank, "Gazella subgutturosa," *Mammalian Species* 518

Palestine.[91] Natural reproductive patterns notwithstanding, the poet is very likely simply mentioning two animals that conventionally go together, as we have seen in the coincidence of gazelle and deer imagery already discussed. Scholars generally regard these verses as comments on the ideal symmetry of the woman's breasts and not on the actual behavior of these animals.

Returning to Murphy's summary above, the symmetry is a more obvious point of the similes, but beyond that the basis for the comparison is less clear. A few commentators, like Rudolph, have suggested the poet is painting a clear picture of these animals: "auf der blumenbedeckten Flur äsen zwei Kitzchen, nur ihr Rücken ragt über die hochgewachsenen Blumen heraus. Diesem runden, glatten, in der Sonne glänzenden Rücken der weidenden Jungtiere vergleicht er die wohlgeformten gleichmäßigen Brüste."[92] Perhaps the poem is referencing specifically the fawns' shape: "The head of a fawn, with its protuberant forehead sloping steeply down to its delicate contrasted nose, bears a close likeness to the curve of a young woman's breast, sloping down to the nipple."[93] Alternatively, perhaps the fawns' coloring the intended meaning: "It is conjured up by the round, white spots on the rump of the fawn: as a pair of fawns are suckling at the side of their dam, the spots from a distance look like light breasts against

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(1996): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504241, here 4.

[91] Antoine J. Sempéré, Vladimir E. Sokolov, and Aleksey A. Danilkin, "Capreolus capreolus," *Mammalian Species* 538 (1996): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504309, here 3.

[92] Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth/Das Hohe Lied/Die Klagelieder*, 147: "in the flower-covered meadow two fawns graze; only their backs protrude over the tall flowers. He compares her well-formed, symmetrical breasts to these round, smooth young animals glistening in the sun." See also Karl Budde, *Die fünf Megillot (Das Hohelied, Das Buch Ruth, Die Klagelieder, Der Prediger, Das Buch Esther)*, Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament 17 (Leipzig: Mohr Siebeck, 1898), 21, for a similar reading.

[93] Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 34.

the mother's sun-tanned skin."[94] Or perhaps these verses draw on the fawns' "awkward, frisky, and playful" movements: "The graceful yet unexpected motion of the breasts when the whole body moves may suggest the sudden mobility of a young gazelle."[95]

Most interpreters, however, don't regard this as quite so literal a picture. Rather, it is the connotations of the fawns that matter here: their "youthful freshness,"[96] their "tenderness,"[97] and their "playfulness, energy, and sexuality."[98] For most readers, then, this animal simile highlights the woman's youth and sensuality more than reproducing an exact outline of her shape.

As previously mentioned, Song 4:5 and 7:4 are identical except for the extra colon in 4:5, the line "grazing among the lotuses," which the reader will have already seen in 2:16 (singular there to describe the one man, but plural here for the two breasts). Cheryl Exum notes a peculiar fact about this usage: "Here, in a paradoxical appropriation of the image, he pictures the breasts doing the grazing."[99] In 2:16–17, the man's "grazing" action can be read sexually, an indication of his intimacy with the woman's body, figured as lotuses, in contrast to the woman's own body being the deer in 4:5. She turns to Francis Landy for elucidation, who offers that this is "a clear case of projection; in the

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[94] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 15.

[95] Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 150.

[96] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 76; see also Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 28; Paul Haupt, *The Book of Canticles: A New Rhythmical Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902), 46; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 470.

[97] Garrett, "Song of Songs," 405.

[98] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 191.

[99] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 166.

breast the man sees an early version of himself, since elsewhere in the poem there is a stock comparison of the man with a fawn.”[100] He sees himself in her and presents this feeling by way of the same gazelle/deer imagery she has already used of him.

Goat and Sheep

<table>
<tr><th>Hebrew</th><th>English</th><th>taxonomic name</th><th>references</th></tr>
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Sheep and goats in the Song typically appear as collective “flock(s)” or as plural “kids”—as undistinguished masses without reference to individuals within the flocks or even to the distinct species that might make up those flocks. The stark bifurcation of goats vs. sheep seen in Matthew 25:32–33 is nowhere present in the Song. There are only a few exceptions to this trend. First, Song 1:14 names En Gedi (עֵין גֶּדִי, “spring of the kid”), which mentions a singular individual but hides it in a place name, not specifying the species. Second, Song 6:6 names הָרְחֵלִים (“the ewes”), which is actually the reverse, specifying a species without pointing to any particular individual. The “ewes” here are a

[100] Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 68.

“minor variant” in an otherwise nearly identical repeated passage, simply substituting for הַקְּצוּבוֹת (“shorn ones”) in 4:2.[101]

Sheep and goats were very important in the lives of ancient Palestinian peoples. Alongside cattle, they are among the most common nonhuman animal remains found in archaeological digs.[102] Sheep were raised for their wool (goats too, but less so), and both animals were used as sources of meat and milk.[103] Their value among humans also extended to having value for the divine, as they were used for animal sacrifice, to the extent that a mention of sheep and goats could “evoke the entire sacrificial system.”[104] The care of these animals required the specialized human role of the shepherd, a common occupation in the Hebrew Bible both literally and figuratively. The patriarch Jacob is depicted as intimately involved in the caretaking and breeding of goats in Genesis 30, and David is a shepherd in 1 Samuel 17:34 who delivers cheese, the product of his family’s flock, to hungry warriors (1 Sam 17:18). The prophet Ezekiel decries the misdeeds of Judah’s leaders as a shepherd mishandling and abusing a flock in Ezekiel 34. As a result of the significance of these creatures, it is no surprise to see them featured prominently among the Song’s menagerie.

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[101] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 215.

[102] Sasson, *Animal Husbandry in Ancient Israel*, 2.

[103] Firmage, “Zoology (Fauna),” 6:1126–29.

[104] Rimbach, “Animal Imagery in the Old Testament,” 125. As examples, Rimbach cites 1 Sam 15:22 and Isa 1:11, among others.

Sheep and/or Shepherds (1:7–8)

הַגִּ֣ידָה לִּ֗י שֶׁאָֽהֲבָה֙ נַפְשִׁ֔י Tell me, [you] whom my being loves,
אֵיכָ֣ה תִרְעֶ֔ה Where do you graze?
אֵיכָ֖ה תַּרְבִּ֣יץ בַּֽצָּהֳרָ֑יִם Where do you make [your sheep] lie down at noon?
שַׁלָּמָ֤ה אֶֽהְיֶה֙ כְּעֹ֣טְיָ֔ה For why should I be like one who is veiled
עַ֖ל עֶדְרֵ֥י חֲבֵרֶֽיךָ׃ Beside the flocks of your friends?
אִם־לֹ֤א תֵֽדְעִי֙ לָ֔ךְ If you do not know for yourself,
הַיָּפָ֖ה בַּנָּשִׁ֑ים [Most] beautiful among women,
צְֽאִי־לָ֞ךְ Follow for yourself
בְּעִקְבֵ֣י הַצֹּ֗אן In the footprints of the flock.
וּרְעִי֙ אֶת־גְּדִיֹּתַ֔יִךְ And pasture your kids
עַ֖ל מִשְׁכְּנ֥וֹת הָרֹעִֽים׃ Beside the tents of the shepherds. (1:7–8)

Song 1:7–8 consists of questions and an answer. The woman is universally held to be the first speaker in this exchange, asking about the whereabouts of her man. The second speaker is debated, with earlier commentators taking it as some sort of chorus, a harem, or the ladies of a royal court,[105] though more recent commentators have regarded the second speaker as the man himself.[106] The context of this exchange appears to be vaguely sexual: the woman could be seeking her beloved in order to meet up for a tryst.[107]

One matter of debate in these two verses is the identification of who precisely is a sheep in the metaphorical language here and who is a shepherd. The common reading is that the woman, a shepherd, is asking the man, who is also a shepherd, where he takes his sheep to graze.[108] This view requires the insertion of "your sheep" as the direct object of

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[105] So Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 136; so also Renan, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 12; Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 3; Lehrman, "The Song of Songs," 3; Garrett, "Song of Songs," 387.

[106] So Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth/Das Hohe Lied/Die Klagelieder*, 126; Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 16–17; Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 84; Weems, "The Song of Songs," 386.

[107] Haupt, *The Book of Canticles*, 53; Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, 103; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 328; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 103.

[108] So Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 30; Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth/Das Hohe Lied/Die Klagelieder*, 125; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 131; Garrett, "Song of Songs," 387; Weems, "The Song of Songs," 385–86; Farley, *The Song of Songs*, 38.

the transitive verbs תִּרְעֶה and תַּרְבִּיץ, an object understood but not explicitly stated.[109] Luis Stadelman sees a deliberate effect achieved by the omission of the object: “By leaving out the reference to the direct object, the verbal action gains additional emphasis, intended specifically to qualify the function of the shepherd.”[110] This reading makes a lot of sense with תַּרְבִּיץ, a *hiphil* verb easily read as causative: “you cause [your sheep] to lie down.” The other verb, תִּרְעֶה, is less clear. Adding the object does make sense (“you graze [your sheep]”), but רעה need not be read transitively here. It could instead depict the woman asking the man, envisioned as a sheep, where he *himself* grazes.[111] Huwiler says the woman’s question is “halfway between asking the man where he grazes and rests, and asking him where he takes his flocks to graze and rest.”[112] Similarly, Tod Linafelt regards תִּרְעֶה as a “double entendre,” with the meaning being “patently sexual” in either case.[113] Even Michael Fox, who reads both verbs transitively, adding the direct object in both cases, gets them a little confused, suggesting the man is a “shepherd” here but also that he “‘eats’—enjoys sexual pleasures—with her,” as if he were a grazing sheep. For more on the ambiguity in these verses, see chapter 4.

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[109] Robert and Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 76; Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création*, 78; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 328.

[110] Stadelman, *Love and Politics*, 39.

[111] Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, Studies in Biblical Literature 96 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 146.

[112] Huwiler, “The Song of Songs,” 252.

[113] Linafelt, “Structure, Sound, and Sense,” 123.

Hair like Goats and Teeth like Sheep (4:1–2; 6:5–6)

הִנָּ֨ךְ יָפָ֤ה רַעְיָתִי֙	Behold, you are beautiful, my darling.
הִנָּ֣ךְ יָפָ֔ה	Behold, you are beautiful.
עֵינַ֣יִךְ יוֹנִ֔ים מִבַּ֖עַד לְצַמָּתֵ֑ךְ	Your eyes are doves from behind your veil.
שַׂעְרֵךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הָֽעִזִּ֔ים	Your hair is like a flock of goats
שֶׁגָּלְשׁ֖וּ מֵהַ֥ר גִּלְעָֽד׃	That is flowing from the mountain of Gilead.
שִׁנַּ֙יִךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הַקְּצוּב֔וֹת	Your teeth are like a flock of shorn [ewes]
שֶׁעָל֖וּ מִן־הָֽרַחְצָ֑ה	That are coming up from washing,
שֶׁכֻּלָּם֙ מַתְאִימ֔וֹת	All of which bear twins,
וְשַׁכֻּלָ֖ה אֵ֥ין בָּהֶֽם׃	And none among them is bereaved of children. (4:1–2)

הָסֵ֤בִּי עֵינַ֙יִךְ֙ מִנֶּגְדִּ֔י	Make your eyes go away from before me,
שֶׁ֥הֵ֖ם הִרְהִיבֻ֑נִי	For they overwhelm me.
שַׂעְרֵךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הָֽעִזִּ֔ים	You hair is like a flock of goats
שֶׁגָּלְשׁ֖וּ מִן־הַגִּלְעָֽד׃	That goes down from Gilead.
שִׁנַּ֙יִךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הָֽרְחֵלִ֔ים	Your teeth are like a flock of ewes
שֶׁעָל֖וּ מִן־הָֽרַחְצָ֑ה	That are coming up from washing,
שֶׁכֻּלָּם֙ מַתְאִימ֔וֹת	All of which bear twins,
וְשַׁכֻּלָ֖ה אֵ֥ין בָּהֶֽם׃	And none among them is bereaved of children. (6:5–6)

Goats and sheep appear in 4:1–2 and the parallel passage 6:5–6 as descriptors of the woman's hair and teeth. In this waṣf, the man compares the woman's hair to "a flock of goats" (עֵדֶר הָעִזִּים) flowing down Mount Gilead (4:1). For many commentators, this comparison is grounded in the *dark color* of the goats' fur. For instance, Fox says, "Flowing tresses of black hair may be said to resemble lines of black goats seen from afar as they wend their way down the mountainside."[114] S. M. Lehrman says their black fur shines, adding to the beauty: "Each braid of her hair is as glossy as the goat whose natural colour was black. When the sun shone upon the goat, its hair glistened with a beautiful sheen."[115] This could potentially cohere with the description of "the tents of Qedar" and "curtains of Solomon" in 1:5, which are characterized as "dark"—if these tents and

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[114] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 129.

[115] Lehrman, "The Song of Songs," 13.

curtains are made from the skin of these goats, then the woman's dark skin (1:5) and dark hair (4:1) both rely on the goats' dark exterior. Other scholars point more to the *texture* of her hair as the basis for the simile: "the goats cannot correspond to smooth hair, but to curly, one goat per curl."[116] Ginsburg speaks glowingly of this pastoral image: "Nothing, therefore, could more beautifully express the curly hair of a woman, dangling down from the crown of her head, than the sight, at a distance, of a flock of goats running down from the summit of this verdant hill on a beautiful day."[117] Many readers also see both color and texture at play here, such as Ellen Davis, who reads her hair as "black curls or waves, like dark-haired goats, tumbling thick and loose."[118]

The goats may be black or curly or both, but a deeper mystery lies in understanding the action the goats are taking, which is complicated by the fact that the verb גָּלְשׁוּ is a hapax legomenon, appearing only here and with identical phrasing in 6:5. The ancient versions are of little help here, as Pope suggests they may have been translating from different words altogether: the Septuagint's αἳ ἀπεκαλύφθησαν ("those who were revealed"; cf. KJV "appear") may come from a Heb. reading of שֶׁגָּלוּ (from גלי, "uncover, reveal"), and the Vulgate's *ascenderunt* ("ascended") may indicate a Heb. reading of שֶׁעָלוּ (from עלי, "ascend").[119] Earlier commentators identified the MT's verb גלשׁ as cognate with the Arab. جَلَسَ (*jls*, "sit" or "recline"), which suggests the goats are

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[116] Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 33.

[117] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 154.

[118] Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 264.

[119] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 458.

"repos[ing] downwards"[120] or "reclining"[121] on the mountain. Heinrich Graetz uses a possible Syriac cognate to arrive at "geglättet" ("made smooth"), so like the shorn sheep in the next verse, for him these goats have their hair cut; this explanation is rejected by most.[122] Budde suggests a closer parallel in the later Heb. verb גלשׁ ("boil over"),[123] though this is a view rarely taken up today; Barbiero stands out in citing this imagery and renders the verb "gambolling down," reflecting the energetic movement of boiling water.[124] Erman finds a cognate in *kꜣ-rꜣ-św*, which he identifies as a Semitic word imported into Egyptian.[125] He translates this as "hüpfen, tanzen" ("hop, dance") or "springen" ("jump"); Gillis Gerleman follows this interpretation, but few others have.[126]

A more persuasive explanation comes with the publication of Ugaritic texts. Pope suggests that גלשׁ is cognate with Ugaritic *gl<u>t</u>*, which also connects to water imagery and should be rendered as "surge" or "stream."[127] Later, Steven Tuell wrote what seems to be a definitive article on this Ugaritic parallel, arguing that it is not the black color of the goats that is the basis of comparison but rather their motion: "A densely packed herd,

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[120] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 71.

[121] Waterman, *The Song of Songs*, 63.

[122] Graetz, *Schir Ha-Schirim*, 50.

[123] Budde, *Die fünf Megillot*, 20.

[124] Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 167.

[125] Adolf Erman, "Hebräisch בלשׁ „springen"," *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 28 (1925): 6, https://doi.org/10.1524/olzg.1925.28.16.3a.

[126] Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, 144.

[127] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 460, citing J. C. Greenfield, "Amurrite, Ugaritic and Canaanite," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Semitic Studies, Held in Jerusalem, 19-23 July 1965* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1969), 99 n. 36.

viewed from a distance, seems to move downhill with a rippling, wavelike motion, as the animals in the front move forward and others move up to take their place."[128] Tuell thus glosses גָּלְשׁוּ as "flowing in waves," and many others have accepted this water imagery, yielding a number of variations on the theme: "swept down,"[129] "descend in waves,"[130] "stream down,"[131] "winding down,"[132] and "herabgleiten" ("slide down").[133] Dianne Bergant notes that the woman's hair "courses down the mountainside like a flowing stream, moving up and down as rippling water does. This movement suggests both the cascading movement of her hair down her head, neck and shoulders and the waviness of the hair itself."[134] Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch translate it as "bounding down," with the implication being "heavy, thick, wavy hair in flowing motion."[135] I myself have accepted this explanation in my translation, thus "flowing." Finally, a few modern translations are less committal with regard to the type of imagery implied by גלשׁ but do accept some sort of downward trajectory, e.g., "moving down" (RSV, NRSVue)[136] and "descending" (TNIV, NIV 2011).

Most readers are satisfied with a naturalistic explanation of the woman's hair as

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[128] Steven S. Tuell, "A Riddle Resolved by an Enigma: Hebrew גלשׁ and Ugaritic *GLṮ*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 99–104, https://doi.org/10.2307/3267867, here 103.

[129] Alter, "The Song of Songs," 23.

[130] Hess, *Song of Songs*, 111.

[131] Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 112; so also NJPS, CEB.

[132] Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 39; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 151.

[133] Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 180.

[134] Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 44.

[135] Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 73, 169.

[136] So also Meek, Kerr, and Kerr, "The Song of Songs," 121.

goats, but a few point also to the supernatural. The wild uncontrollability of the woman's curls reflects the wildness of "the absence of urban civilization."[137] Othmar Keel opines that "from the perspective of city culture, where there are goats there must surely be goat-spirits and goat-demons (Isa. 13:21; 34:14). Comparing the hair of the beloved to the impudent black goats in the wilds of Gilead reveals her vitality and her own wild, almost demonic, lust for life."[138] Barbiero takes a similar path in his interpretation, describing Gilead as "a region on the margins of civilisation, close to the desert, traditionally associated with demons and satyrs (cf. Isa 13:21; 34:11; Gen 32:22–33!) The woman embodies the wild and vital forces of nature; she is even the personification of the earth itself."[139] As far as I am aware, Keel and Barbiero are unique in drawing this correlation to Song's goats and Isaiah's "goat-demons" (NRSVue; Heb. שָׂעִיר). Commentators who cite Keel and Barbiero on other matters do not address these claims, and for my part, I do not find it necessary to take recourse to the supernatural, as the pastoral setting explains the simile well enough already.

Moving forward, sheep appear in Song 4:2 and 6:6 as descriptors of the woman's teeth. These verses are virtually identical in their depiction of the scene: her teeth are like sheep coming up from being washed. A few commentators point out the structure of the movement in these goat and sheep images; Bergant, for instance, notes, "The first flock was described as moving down the mountains in an energetic flow; this flock is said to

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[137] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 142.

[138] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 142.

[139] Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 178–79.

have come up out of the water."[140] This washing is universally taken as a sign that the sheep are clean, and because sheep's wool is customarily associated with a white color (Isa 1:18; Dan 7:9; cf. Rev 1:14), the woman's smile must be a clean, gleaming white.

The poet further compliments the woman with twin imagery, playing on the similarity of the sounds of שֶׁכֻּלָּם ("all of them") and שַׁכֻּלָה ("bereft of children").[141] As I have translated it, instead of lacking children, each ewe has her own pair of twins. The participle מַתְאִימוֹת, a *hiphil* from תאם, most naturally means "bearing twins," so there is near-universal agreement that the poet is imagining "two baby lambs, 'twins,' tagging behind their mother."[142] The ancient versions seem to have read this participle the same way, with the Septuagint reading διδυμεύουσαι ("bearing twins," an active participle) and the Vulgate having *gemellis* ("twins" in the plural). In contrast, a few scholars read this not as a mother bearing twins but rather as each lamb having a counterpart, i.e., each one accompanied by its own twin. Garrett argues, "The point here is that every lamb has a twin and not that every sheep has twin children."[143] This is perhaps taking the image too literally, finding fault with a triad of sheep (the mother and two twins) and preferring just two (each sheep and its own twin). This level of literalness is not necessary for poetic discourse, and so the vast majority of scholars have no problem reading this as a mother with twins.

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[140] Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 45; see also Stadelman, *Love and Politics*, 112.

[141] Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 170; Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, 60.

[142] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 162.

[143] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 189; cf. also Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 155; Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 86.

Regardless of precisely how one chooses to translate מַתְאִימוֹת, scholars agree that the intended message of this twin imagery is that the woman's teeth all come in pairs—i.e., she has a complete set of teeth with none missing. The twin teeth could be meant vertically ("each upper tooth and the corresponding lower tooth look like twins"[144]) or horizontally ("each tooth on the right side of the face has a matching tooth on the left side"[145]), but in either case, her teeth are perfect. The birth of twin sheep appears to have been a rather rare event, which may in turn indicate the rarity and specialness of the woman's flawless teeth, despite not having modern dentistry.[146] In addition to reading this statement as suggestive of pairs of teeth, a few scholars have also noted that because the ewes' bearing twins here is a reference to reproduction, it therefore could be "suggestive of the fertility cult"[147] or "a subconscious reflection of the man looking forward to the woman's ability to bear children."[148] Perhaps some emphasis on fecundity or procreation is meant here, but the majority of scholars do not follow this interpretation and put the focus instead on the woman's teeth.

As mentioned above, Song 4:2 and 6:6 are virtually identical, and the one place they differ is a subject of debate. Song 6:6 has the more straightforward reading, describing the sheep as הָֽרְחֵלִים ("the ewes"), but much less clear is 4:2's choice of הַקְּצוּבוֹת, a *qal* passive participle from קצב ("cut off," "be cut, shorn," *CDCH*). Leroy

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[144] Haupt, *The Book of Canticles*, 45.

[145] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 189.

[146] Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 45.

[147] Meek, Kerr, and Kerr, "The Song of Songs," 121.

[148] Benjamin J. Segal, *The Song of Songs: A Woman in Love* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2009), 40; cf. also Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 335–36.

Waterman suggests that קצב is actually the wrong word and that קבץ ("gather") is intended instead, "for when sheep go up from the washing, they tend to scatter and have to be gathered together."[149] To my knowledge, no one has followed Waterman's reading here, and even he is dissatisfied with it: "The figure is still far from happy, since it fails to convey a picture of the orderliness of a good set of teeth, and suggests, rather, that they are jumbled together." Without manuscript evidence or any other reason to doubt the MT's reading of קצב, most scholars accept it as it is, taking up the next task of determining its meaning here.

The verb קצב also appears in 2 Kings 6:6 in the context of cutting a stick, so the meaning of shorn sheep makes a lot of sense here. That said, questions remain about the sequence of events here—is the shearing first or is the washing first? For some scholars, the sheep have already been shorn prior to washing, and thus "the backs of shorn sheep create the effect of whiteness and cleanliness here."[150] This is perhaps the more expected meaning of the passive participle הַקְּצוּבוֹת (i.e., "those having been shorn"). But a significant number of readers find a logical problem with this reading, either because they do not regard it as customary to shear sheep before washing them or because they think the image would not be pleasing. For example, Theophile Meek suggests, "The passive participle הקצובות here expresses imminent action (as the participle frequently does), 'about to be shorn,' not completed action: shorn ewes would be anything but beautiful,

[149] Waterman, *The Song of Songs*, 64.

[150] Hess, *Song of Songs*, 129; so also Stadelman, *Love and Politics*, 112; Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 189; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 162; Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 123; Good, *The Song of Songs*, 82.

and sheep are washed before shearing, not afterward."[151] Similarly, Barbiero says that "'ready for the shearing' is perfectly possible in the Hebrew language, all the more so in a poetic text."[152] Sidestepping this before-vs.-after problem, Ginsburg takes this as a recurring action: "The passage in vi. 6, shows that קְצוּבוֹת is merely a poetical epithet for רְחֵלִים, not because they were then shorn, but because they are *periodically* shorn."[153]

A few others note that in addition to its "cutting"/"shearing" meaning, the root קצב also pops up in the expression קֶצֶב אֶחָד ("one form," i.e., the same shape, 1 Kgs 6:25; 7:37). Because the Song's sheep imagery here also mentions twins, perhaps then קצב refers to the sheep all having corresponding appearances. In this way, Alter glosses Song 4:2's עֵדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת as "a flock of matched ewes."[154] Each pair of sheep/teeth, then, is perfectly matched in this reading. Furthermore, Michael Fishbane accepts both semantic possibilities for קצב, sensing a "double entendre" here, with the sheep being both shorn and similar in shape.[155]

In my own translation, I have glossed הַקְּצוּבוֹת as "shorn [ewes]," as both the "shearing" meaning of קצב and the "having already happened" sense of the passive participle seem the simplest, but ultimately, the precise identification of this word is not necessary to determine the poet's presumed intention. Human teeth do not generally have hair, so it is not likely that the "shearing" aspect is an essential part of the simile here.

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[151] Meek, Kerr, and Kerr, "The Song of Songs," 121.

[152] Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 179; so also Pope, *Song of Songs*, 458; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 155; Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, 60; Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 45.

[153] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 155, emphasis original.

[154] Alter, "The Song of Songs," 24; see also Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 184.

[155] Fishbane, *Song of Songs*, 105.

The features of Song 4:2 and 6:6 that are most significant for the overall waṣf are the cleanness of her teeth and the fact that they appear in pairs.

Dove

Hebrew	English	taxonomic name	references
יוֹנָה	dove or pigeon	various species in the family Columbidae	1:15; 2:14; 4:1; 5:2, 12; 6:9[156]
תֹּר	turtledove	various species in the family Columbidae, particularly of the genus *Streptopelia*	2:12[157]

The Woman as Dove (2:14; 5:2; 6:9)

יוֹנָתִ֞י בְּחַגְוֵ֣י הַסֶּ֗לַע My dove, in the cleft of the rock,
בְּסֵ֙תֶר֙ הַמַּדְרֵגָ֔ה In the secret place of the cliff,
הַרְאִ֙ינִי֙ אֶת־מַרְאַ֔יִךְ Let me see your face,
הַשְׁמִיעִ֖ינִי אֶת־קוֹלֵ֑ךְ Let me hear your voice,
כִּי־קוֹלֵ֥ךְ עָרֵ֖ב For your voice is sweet,
וּמַרְאֵ֥יךְ נָאוֶֽה׃ And your face is lovely. (2:14)

אֲנִ֥י יְשֵׁנָ֖ה וְלִבִּ֣י עֵ֑ר I am asleep, but my heart stirs.
ק֣וֹל ׀ דּוֹדִ֣י דוֹפֵ֗ק The voice of my beloved knocks:
פִּתְחִי־לִ֞י אֲחֹתִ֤י רַעְיָתִי֙ "Open to me, my sister, my darling,
יוֹנָתִ֣י תַמָּתִ֔י My dove, my blameless one,
שֶׁרֹּאשִׁי֙ נִמְלָא־טָ֔ל For my head is filled with dew,
קְוֻּצּוֹתַ֖י רְסִ֥יסֵי לָֽיְלָה׃ My locks of hair with drops of the night." (5:2)

אַחַ֥ת הִיא֙ יוֹנָתִ֣י תַמָּתִ֔י Only she is my dove, my blameless one,
אַחַ֥ת הִיא֙ לְאִמָּ֔הּ Only she is her mother's,
בָּרָ֥ה הִ֖יא לְיֽוֹלַדְתָּ֑הּ Pure is she to the one who bore her.
רָא֤וּהָ בָנוֹת֙ וַֽיְאַשְּׁר֔וּהָ Daughters saw her and called her blessed.
מְלָכ֥וֹת וּפִֽילַגְשִׁ֖ים וַֽיְהַלְלֽוּהָ׃ Queens and lovers praised her. (6:9)

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[156] The phrase "my dove" also appears in the Septuagint in 2:10 (περιστερά μου, in place of the MT's יָפָתִי) and 2:13 (as an addition), and in 2:10 of some manuscripts of the Vulgate (*columba mea,* in place of the MT's רַעְיָתִי). No extant Hebrew manuscript, however, attests to יוֹנָתִי in any of these verses.

[157] The Septuagint and Vulgate also have "turtledove" in 1:10 (τρυγόνες, *turturis*), confusing תּוֹר-I (bangle, ornament) with תּוֹר-II (turtledove).

Three times in the Song the woman is called “my dove” by her lover.[158] In the first instance (2:14), the man pictures her “in the cleft of the rock,” taking shelter in a cliff face, and he speaks to her to draw her out of hiding. For many commentators, this highlights a theme of inaccessibility found throughout the Song[159]—the pair frequently can’t find one another and must search or cross distances in order to enjoy the company of the other (cf. 2:8; 5:6; 7:1; see also the discussion of lions and leopards in 4:8 below). This dove imagery points to her “shyness and modesty”; because of social restraints, physical distance, or the woman’s own bashfulness, she is temporarily inaccessible to the man.[160] The dove is not known for its defensive capabilities—it is, as André Robert says, “sottement naïve et sans défense” (“foolishly naïve and defenseless”)[161]—and thus it must protect itself by nesting in rocky, difficult terrain (cf. the similar dove imagery in Jer 48:28; Ezek 7:16). Perhaps, as Feliks suggests, she has a real reason to be frightened, as she may be threatened by the “foxes” of the next verse: “He promises her that the ‘little foxes’ that spoil the vineyard of their young love will yet be caught. So she need no longer feel fright, even if, innocent dove, she is surrounded by wild and ravening beasts.”[162] In 2:14, then, the man calls on the reluctant woman to leave her shelter and

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[158] In contrast to the possessive suffix on לְסֻסָתִי in 1:9, scholars rarely remark on the ִ–י suffix on יוֹנָתִי (“*my* dove”). A few, however, do note that it does not show ownership but rather love; see Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 106, 188.

[159] Budde, *Die fünf Megillot*, 11; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 141; Garrett, “Song of Songs,” 394; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 128.

[160] Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 16; see also Graetz, *Schir Ha-Schirim*, 144; Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création*, 124.

[161] Robert and Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 121–22.

[162] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 60.

accompany him in safety.[163]

The shyness of the dove and therefore of the woman has its own appealing quality to the man. Ginsburg notes that she has a "timorous character" that earns her "the endearing epithet 'dove'."[164] Danilo Verde says that "the dove metaphor seems to point out her elusiveness, through which she probably plays hard to get."[165] Others emphasize her placidity. Bergant describes the dove in this way: "both the sight and the sound of the dove bespeak tenderness. The soft lines of the bird's contours and the purity of its color suggest gentleness; the sound of its cooing has a calming effect on the spirit."[166] As a dove, the woman is "gentle and affectionate."[167] Her timidity draws the man in as he yearns to get closer to this gentle soul.

A few commentators also point to the dove's associations with love goddesses. Pope, for instance, opines, "The dove is the lovebird par excellence and the symbol and attribute of the love goddesses, Ishtar, Atargatis, Aphrodite," and he notes that "[t]he dove's prodigious erotic propensities made it powerful medicine in love magic."[168] Keel also observes that the dove "can serve as a messenger of love or as a representative of the goddess," and as the man encounters the woman, so "the speaker encounters love—if not

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[163] Lehrman, "The Song of Songs," 9; Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 160.

[164] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 147.

[165] Danilo Verde, "Dove Metaphors in the Song of Songs: Between Cultural Conventions and Poetic Creativity," in *Human Interaction with the Natural World in Wisdom Literature and Beyond: Essays in Honour of Tova L. Forti*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Katharine J. Dell, and David A. Glatt-Gilad, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 720 (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 138.

[166] Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 30.

[167] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 128.

[168] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 399–400.

the love-goddess—in person."[169] Barbiero concurs: "The dove is the animal of the goddess of love: the metaphor strengthens the sacral aura which shrouds the woman. In her, the man encounters Love in person."[170] These divine connotations may also be at play in the man's reference to the woman as his "dove," though once again the majority of recent commentators do not see a need to take recourse to divinity to explain this metaphor.

The other two appearances in the Song of what Gerleman calls a "Kosename" ("pet name")[171] occur in 5:2 and 6:9, where she is twice called יוֹנָתִי תַמָּתִי ("my dove, my blameless one"[172]). These mentions of the bird occur as epithets, without the further elaboration on the dove's nesting behavior seen in 2:14. Its uses in these verses make it a "term of endearment" for sure,[173] but they do not refer to the actual animal in any specificity. Perhaps by placing these verses within the same poetic collection as 2:14, the redactor means for hearers to recall the shy beauty of the woman in other contexts throughout the Song. However, in spite of a lack any explicit description, a few scholars note that the poet may be drawing on the typically monogamous practice of the real-world dove.[174] Nicholas Ayo notes, "Rock-doves are monogamous lovebirds," and

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[169] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 106.

[170] Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 340.

[171] Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, 125.

[172] The adjective תָּם in these verses is elsewhere rendered "undefiled" (KJV), "perfect" (RSV, CEB, NRSVue), "faultless" (NJPS), and "flawless" (NIV).

[173] Hess, *Song of Songs*, 169.

[174] Abdel Fattah N. Abd Rabou and Mohammed A. Abd Rabou, "Notes on the Pigeons and Doves (Family Columbidae) Occurring in the Gaza Strip – Palestine," *Jordan Journal of Natural History* 6 (2019): 30–38, here 31.

Benjamin Segal says, “The dove has only one mate.”[175] Menahem Blondheim and Hananel Rosenberg observe that doves’ ability to bond makes them significant to humans: “Constancy, stability, and harmony in relationships between partners are prominent characteristics of doves.”[176] It is for this reason perhaps that the man can claim of the woman, “Only she is my dove” (אַחַ֥ת הִיא֙ יוֹנָתִ֣י תַמָּתִ֔י, 6:9). With some knowledge of the actual bird’s habits, one can see the virtues of loyalty and fidelity in the man’s praise of the woman.

Eyes as Doves (1:15; 4:1; 5:12)

הִנָּ֤ךְ יָפָה֙ רַעְיָתִ֔י	Behold, you are beautiful, my darling.
הִנָּ֥ךְ יָפָ֖ה	Behold, you are beautiful.
עֵינַ֥יִךְ יוֹנִֽים׃	Your eyes are doves. (1:15)
הִנָּ֨ךְ יָפָ֤ה רַעְיָתִי֙	Behold, you are beautiful, my darling.
הִנָּ֣ךְ יָפָ֔ה	Behold, you are beautiful.
עֵינַ֣יִךְ יוֹנִ֔ים מִבַּ֖עַד לְצַמָּתֵ֑ךְ	Your eyes are doves from behind your veil.
שַׂעְרֵךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הָֽעִזִּ֔ים	Your hair is like a flock of goats
שֶׁגָּלְשׁ֖וּ מֵהַ֥ר גִּלְעָֽד׃	That is flowing from the mountain of Gilead. (4:1)
עֵינָ֕יו כְּיוֹנִ֖ים עַל־אֲפִ֣יקֵי מָ֑יִם	His eyes are like doves over channels of water,
רֹֽחֲצוֹת֙ בֶּֽחָלָ֔ב	Washed in milk,
יֹשְׁב֖וֹת עַל־מִלֵּֽאת׃	Dwelling over a pond. (5:12)

In three places in the Song, a poetic speaker casts their lover’s eyes as doves. In 1:15, the man compliments the woman, twice calling her beautiful, and then comments, “Your eyes are doves.” The man revisits this metaphor in his waṣf in 4:1, repeating the entirety of 1:15 and adding that her “eyes are doves from behind your veil.” Finally, the woman

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[175] Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 120; Segal, *The Song of Songs*, 18.

[176] Menahem Blondheim and Hananel Rosenberg, “Nature’s Apostle: The Dove as Communicator in the Hebrew Bible, from Ararat to Nineveh,” *Religions* 15 (2024): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040502, here 3.

takes a turn, speaking in third person about her man in a waṣf of her own: "His eyes are like doves over channels of water" (5:12a).

Perhaps the first step in examining these three verses is to determine precisely what the poet is saying. To be specific, there is disagreement about whether this is a comparison of human eyes to dove eyes or a comparison of human eyes to doves themselves. The MT says the eyes either *are* doves (יוֹנִים, 1:15; 4:1) or are *like* doves (כְּיוֹנִים, 5:12), but this could potentially be an instance of poetic terseness in which the *eyes* of the dove are the ultimate referent. For 1:15 and 4:1, the Vulgate has *oculi tui columbarum* ("your eyes are [those] of doves"), with the genitive *columbarum* implying a reference to the eyes of doves. A few older translators follow this translation, like Luther ("deine Augen sind wie Taubenaugen") and the KJV ("thou hast doves' eyes"). Some older commentators, like Delitzsch and Andrew Harper, also make this case.[177]

The more common interpretation of this comparison, however, is that it alludes to doves themselves rather than to their eyes specifically. Whereas the Vulgate's rendering of 1:15 and 4:1 referred to dove eyes, it switches it up in 5:12 (*oculi eius sicut columbae*), where *columbae* is nominative, referring to the dove itself and not something pertaining to it. The Septuagint seems to refer to the dove itself in its translations of these three verses (ὀφθαλμοί σου περιστεραί, 1:15; 4:1; ὀφθαλμοὶ αὐτοῦ ὡς περιστεραὶ, 5:12). The majority of modern English translations seem to follow this track, speaking only of doves and not their eyes. The RSV, NRSVue, CEB, and NIV, among others, have "your eyes are doves" in 1:15; 4:1 and "His eyes are like doves" in 5:12. The NJPS is fairly

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[177] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 38; Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 8.

straightforward in 4:1, adding “like” (“Your eyes are like doves!”), but 1:15 is translated “With your dovelike eyes,” though the language is identical to 4:1 in the MT. Rarely do scholars comment on their choice of the animal itself over against pointing to its eyes specifically, but a few who do venture an explanation suggest that doves’ eyes aren’t particularly worthy of attention. Paul Joüon, for instance, says that doves’ eyes “n’ont rien de bien remarquable et sont, en tout cas, bien inférieurs à de beaux yeux humains” (“have nothing very remarkable and are, in any case, very inferior to beautiful human eyes”), and Keel regards them as “hardly impressive.”[178] Finally, Falk offers a middle ground between the eyes of the animal and the animal itself, offering this translation of 1:15: “How fine you are, my love, your eyes like doves’.” In this way, the doves’ eyes are referenced in the printed text, “while leaving the heard image ambiguous, as it is in the Hebrew.”[179]

The meaning of the dove imagery in these verses is another matter to consider. For some, the intent of the dove comparison is to communicate abstract qualities that doves and the lovers are seen to possess: “The point of comparison is the innocence and purity of the dove.”[180] For others, the comparison points to physical characteristics, like the “plumage chatoyant” (“shimmering plumage”) mirrored in a lover’s eye,[181] or the

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[178] Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 148; Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 69. See also Robert and Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 91; Garrett, “The Song of Songs,” 147. In addition, see Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, 114, who traces the origin of the dove/eye comparison to Egyptian art.

[179] Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 172.

[180] Lehrman, “The Song of Songs,” 4.

[181] Robert and Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 91; see also Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création*, 93.

oval shape of human eyes that “resemble[s] the body of the dove,”[182] or the “quick movements” of doves that “flutter like eyes.”[183] Many others combine these explanations: “The common denominator of eyes and doves is their softness and gentleness, and perhaps also the oval shape of both.”[184] Still others bring up these connotations while preferring “to retain the ambiguity of the reference, thus respecting the polyvalent possibilities of the image.”[185] Finally, some scholars admit that we can’t know for sure what the poet is implying with the dove comparison, though it must be a compliment.[186]

The Voice of the Turtledove (2:12)

הַנִּצָּנִים֙ נִרְא֣וּ בָאָ֔רֶץ	The blossoms are seen in the land.
עֵ֥ת הַזָּמִ֖יר הִגִּ֑יעַ	The time of pruning/singing has come.
וְק֥וֹל הַתּ֖וֹר	And the voice of the turtledove
נִשְׁמַ֥ע בְּאַרְצֵֽנוּ׃	Is heard in our land. (2:12)

The turtledove is the Song’s only bird that is not used to describe one of the lovers; instead, scholars agree that its mention in 2:12 relies on its associations with springtime.

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[182] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 48.

[183] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 356, and Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 18, respectively.

[184] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 106. See also Garrett, “Song of Songs,” 389; Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 147.

[185] Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 22. See also Garrett, “The Song of Songs,” 147–48.

[186] Longman, *Song of Songs*, 108; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 135.

One unique interpretation of the dove imagery is that of Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 71, echoed by Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 78–79, who finds a more specific message in 1:15:

> When Cant. 1:15b speaks of “eyes,” what it really means is “glances.” The same is true in other texts where eyes are said to be enchanting (4:9; 6:5) or, in the view of the prophets and wisdom teachers, seductive (Isa. 3: 1 6; Sir. 26:9). In the present context, given the background of the ancient Near East, one can see the doves only as messengers of love. Thus the sentence would mean: “Your glances are messengers of love!” The man is saying: You are beautiful, and your glances speak to me of love and receptivity.

In Jeremiah 8:7, the turtledove, among other birds, is known for its migration patterns, as it "keeps the time of its coming" (שָׁמְרוּ אֶת־עֵת בֹּאָנָה). As Harper says, "it unfailingly appears in the spring, and by its voice announces its presence in the now leafy woods where it cannot readily be seen."[187] Pope agrees: "The return of the turtledoves to Palestine-Syria in early April is a notable event for bird watchers."[188]

The two cola in this verse that lead into this mention of the turtledove call to mind spring with the mention of "blossoms" and "pruning/singing." This latter word (זָמִיר) requires some explanation. Feliks takes this as "the general name for song-birds" and thus translates the line as "The time of singing birds (*zamir*) is come."[189] This would cohere with the modern Hebrew meaning of זָמִיר, which refers to the nightingale, but the word's usage in the Song is typically understood as an action rather than as a general avian term. One suggestion says זָמִיר comes from the root זמר-I, "song, singing" (*CDCH*), which would indicate the singing of birds, especially the "voice of the turtledove" mentioned in the next colon.[190] Another suggestion takes it from the root זמר-II, "pruning" (*CDCH*), as the word seems to be used on the Gezer calendar (line 6; cf. Lev 25:3). The Septuagint, Vulgate, and Targum, among other ancient sources, take up this interpretation. The most compelling suggestion, however, combines these two explanations, identifying this usage of זָמִיר as "Janus parallelism," pointing to both meanings at once—it means "pruning" in

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[187] Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 15.

[188] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 396.

[189] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 18. See also Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 176–77.

[190] So Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 51; Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 112–13; Alter, "The Song of Songs," 17.

reference to the flora of the previous colon and "singing" in reference to the bird of the subsequent colon.[191] The turtledove's "voice" (קוֹל) in the third colon, to which זָמִיר points forward, is in fact its namesake, an onomatopoetic transcription of its call. Because it sounds like "tur-tur,"[192] it is called תּוֹר in Hebrew (cf. Latin *turtur*; Greek τρυγών, from τρύζω, "to coo").

As a result, the verse gestures definitively toward all the trappings of spring—flowers and agriculturalists' care of plants as well as bird songs, specifically that of the turtledove. This vernal awakening of plant and animal life is a sign of the love awakening between the two lovers. The human couple joins with the rest of creation in the growth of their life and love.

Raven

Hebrew	English	taxonomic name	references
עֹרֵב	raven or rook	*Corvus corax* or *Corvus cornix*	5:11

רֹאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פָּז His head is refined gold.
קְוּצּוֹתָיו תַּלְתַּלִּים His locks of hair are wavy,
שְׁחֹרוֹת כָּעוֹרֵב׃ Black like the raven. (5:11)

The raven, mentioned only in 5:11, appears in a descriptive poem in which the woman depicts the beauty of the man in glowing terms. The animal comparison in this verse is read by commentators universally as a simile describing the black color of the man's hair.

[191] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 113. See also Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, 37–38; Huwiler, "The Song of Songs," 262; Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 159; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 127.

[192] Feliks, *The Animal World of the Bible*, 55; Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 58. See also Haupt, "Difficult Passages in the Song of Songs," 72.

This appears to be the only verse in the Hebrew Bible that uses the raven to connote a dark hue; they are elsewhere associated with their inability to serve as proper food (Lev 11:15; Deut 14:14), their miraculous ability to provide (1 Kgs 17:4, 6) as well as Yahweh's provision for them (Ps 147:9; Job 38:41), and their predatory ability to punish (Prov 30:17) or to be agents of chaos (Isa 34:11). Many readers note the contrast of the man's jet-black hair with his other features, such as his "gold" head (5:11), his "ruddy" complexion (5:10), and his body of "ivory" and "sapphires" (5:14).[193] The man's dark hair mirrors the woman's own dark hair (4:1),[194] and the lack of grey hair and the fact that the man is not bald connote his "youth and vigor."[195] Scholars also note the similar sounds of עֹרֵב ("raven") and עֶרֶב ("evening"), which further emphasizes the allusion to blackness.[196]

While the identification of the author's intention in this verse is uncontroversial, a few readers betray their own feelings about the man's hair color, usually in a way that casts it as odd, in need of explanation. For instance, Ginsburg suggests that "the purest and most jet black" hair is "highly esteemed by the Orientals," and more recently, Ayo has opined that "Oriental peoples prize the color black."[197] These statements evince an obvious orientalism, implying that the hair of Europeans and their descendants constitutes an unmarked category, the more "natural" or expected kind of hair, but other ethnicities

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[193] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 101; Adeney, *The Song of Solomon and the Lamentations of Jeremiah*, 30; Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 70; Hess, *Song of Songs*, 182.

[194] Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 249; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 204.

[195] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 220; cf. Garrett, "Song of Songs," 414.

[196] Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 223.

[197] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 168; Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 185.

constitute a marked category, one that is less expected and so requires elucidation. Similarly, Keel, while avoiding the outright orientalist language, still seems to exoticize the man's features, noting that his "red" skin (5:10) brings the poem into "the realm of the demonic," and that his black hair takes us to "the realm of the hairy goat-spirits and the wild demons"; altogether, these characteristics show the man's "mysterious and uncanny side."[198] Apart from the bare fact of the colors themselves, it is unclear what leads Keel to invoke demons in his commentary, but he certainly sees these negative connotations as an aspect of the man's wild and dangerous allure.

Fox

Hebrew	**English**	**taxonomic name**	**references**
שׁוּעָל	fox or jackal	*Vulpes vulpes* or *Canis aureus*	2:15

אֶחֱזוּ־לָ֙נוּ֙ שֻׁעָלִ֔ים Catch for us foxes,
שֻׁעָלִ֥ים קְטַנִּ֖ים Little foxes
מְחַבְּלִ֣ים כְּרָמִ֑ים That ruin vineyards.
וּכְרָמֵ֖ינוּ סְמָדַֽר׃ Our vineyards are in bloom. (2:15)

Song 2:15 introduces a member of the Canidae family to the book's menagerie. The Hebrew שׁוּעָל seems to cover the semantic territory of both "fox" and "jackal," animals of similar size that could be easily confused, so the precise identity of the animal here is unknown.[199] If this Hebrew word is not of much help in discerning what it is, the behavior described in this verse ("ruining" or "spoiling," מְחַבְּלִים) also does little to assist

[198] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 199.

[199] *CDCH* allows both "fox" and "jackal" as translations of שׁוּעָל, but *DCH* has "jackal (rather than fox)" for reasons unexplained.

the reader in this matter. The verse says that the vineyards are “in bloom” (סְמָדַר), so some scholars suggest these creatures are eating the blossoms that the springtime weather has brought to the grapevine (cf. 2:12), though these readers often add a note about how one should not take this depiction of canids eating flowers literally.[200] Indeed, foxes and jackals are not known for eating blossoms, so other readers suggest they are eating unripe grapes,[201] which has the benefit of fitting closer to these animals’ actual diets but lacks a secure correspondence to the verse, which mentions the grape blooms specifically. A third reading of 2:15 sees the animals as not attacking the vines of the plant at all but rather its roots—perhaps they are burrowing in search of insects, disturbing the plants as they dig up the ground.[202] Finally, maybe they are just “run[ning] through the vineyard in a disruptive and destructive fashion.”[203] In the real lives of these animals, both foxes and jackals are omnivores that rely significantly on the consumption of small mammals and birds, but they also eat insects and fruits,[204] so no precise interpretation of what the animals are doing in 2:15—either burrowing for insects or munching on whatever is

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[200] See Budde, *Die fünf Megillot*, 12; Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 53; Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 60; Good, *The Song of Songs*, 67.

[201] See Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 17; Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 87; Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 118. In addition, Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 24 reads the foxes as spoiling the vines *in spite of* their not having fruit yet: “we should translate the *wᵉ* lit., ‘But our vines are (in) blossom’.”

[202] See D. Ferdinand Hitzig, *Das Hohe Lied*, Kursgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament 16 (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1855), 42; Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 147; Meek, Kerr, and Kerr, “The Song of Songs,” 117; Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 31; J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 196.

[203] Huwiler, “The Song of Songs,” 259.

[204] Serge Lariviere and Maria Pasitschniak-Arts, “Vulpes vulpes,” *Mammalian Species* 537 (1996): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504236, here 5; Patricia D. Moehlman and Virginia Hayssen, “*Canis aureus* (Carnivore: Canidae),” *Mammalian Species* 50.957 (2018): 14–25, https://doi.org/10.1093/mspecies/sey002, here 20.

growing on the vines—will settle the issue of which species this is.

From the Septuagint forward, however, שׁוּעָל has been consistently read as "fox" in this verse (ἀλώπηξ rather than θώς), and nearly every modern English translation of this verse has "foxes."[205] Foxes in particular seem to have been associated with messing up vineyards, as this exact complaint appears in Theocritus (*Idylls* 1.48–50; 5.112–113), perhaps even with similar sexual overtones to that of these animals' actions in the Song.[206] Because of this history of translation and for the sake of simplicity, going forward I'll refer to these creatures as foxes. The reader should bear in mind the uncertain reference here, but given the similarity of foxes and jackals in appearance and behavior, it likely does not make a difference in interpreting the verse here anyway.

Critics have offered a number of explanations for what these foxes might represent. Perhaps they symbolize foreign peoples, like the Canaanites[207] or Persians;[208] perhaps this verse is part of some sort of ancient fertility rite;[209] or perhaps they're just

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[205] Cf. *vulpes* Vulg., "foxis" Wycliffe, *Füchse* Luther, "foxes" NRSVue et al. The exceptions to this are few. The NEB renders שׁוּעָלִים as "jackals" and mysteriously offers "fruit-bats" as an alternative in the text notes. Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 18 believes the plural שׁוּעָלִים must mean "jackals" because they roam in packs, in contrast to solitary foxes, but this is not universally true (Moehlman and Hayssen, "*Canis aureus* [Carnivore: Canidae]"). Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron*, who renders it as "jackals" in her translation of the whole book (p. 24) but uses "foxes" everywhere else (pp. 87, 91–93, 99, 114, 118, 127), making no comment on these translation choices. In a parenthesis Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 114 suggests on the basis of Egyptian parallels that "jackals" might be the correct interpretation, but he proceeds to use "foxes" anyway. Finally, Wilfred G. E. Watson, *The Song of Songs*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2024), https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.16598660, 307, uses "jackals" in his translation but notes that "foxes" is equally possible.

[206] Anselm C. Hagedorn, "Of Foxes and Vineyards: Greek Perspectives on the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 53 (2003): 337–52, https://doi.org/10.1163/156853303768266335.

[207] Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 168; Robert and Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 122–24.

[208] Stadelman, *Love and Politics*, 78–79.

[209] Meek, Kerr, and Kerr, "The Song of Songs," 117.

foxes, just little animals that the characters in a poetic drama are noticing.[210] For most scholars, these foxes stand for forces that would interfere with the couple's love, either any general threat to that love[211] or (more often) competing male courtiers. The numerous scholars who see these foxes as other courtiers differ in exactly how much of a threat they pose to the couple's relationship; because the woman's sexuality has already been figured as a vineyard in need of "keeping" in 1:6, the particular danger here could be men who desire to "spoil" her "vineyard" in 2:15 as well, taking her virginity or violating her sexual autonomy.[212] For instance, Lehrman places the woman in a royal context and sees this verse as a reference to "her danger at court."[213] For Gordis, these foxes are "the young men who lay siege to her," and for Falk, they are "hostile marauders."[214] Bloch and Bloch relate this verse to Judges 21:20–22, a troubling scene in which "the Benjaminites seize wives for themselves from among the daughters of Shiloh."[215] For these interpreters, the foxes point to very real peril for the woman.

Other readers admit the possibility of danger but don't see the situation as quite so dire. Ayo reads this verse as "light-hearted" but notes the presence of "overtones of a

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[210] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 147–48; Budde, *Die fünf Megillot*, 11–12; Stefan Fischer, "The Foxes That Ruin the Vineyards—A Literal Interpretation of Song of Songs 2:15: Research," *Acta Theologica* 23 (2003): 72–85, https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v23i2.5427.

[211] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 53–54; Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 18; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 124–25. Assis, *Flashes of Fire*, 85–87 is unique in suggesting that these "external elements that want to sabotage their love" could include even the daughters of Jerusalem, whom the woman of the Song warns against inciting love too early (2:7).

[212] See Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création*, 125–28; King, "A Love as Fierce as Death," 138; Hess, *Song of Songs*, 97–98.

[213] Lehrman, "The Song of Songs," 9; cf. Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 17.

[214] Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations*, 83; Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 178.

[215] Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 157.

heavier awareness"; similarly, Huwiler hears a "playful tone" but also a "sense of threat."[216] What could be regarded as playful one moment could take a turn for the worst and become like the more abusive scene we find in 5:7. As Yair Zakovitch observes, the foxes are "little" (קְטַנִּים), but they *are* still foxes, so care must be taken.[217] Thus, the intention behind the verse is not nefarious, but these foxy courtiers nevertheless pose a risk.

Still others see the male pursuers symbolized here as just rascally boys who don't pose any real danger. Wilhelm Rudolph advises the reader to take the verse "not too seriously" (*nicht allzu ernst*).[218] Murphy calls the rhetoric in 2:15 "coquettish," Fox "affectionate and gentle," and Barbiero "jocular."[219] Perhaps these foxes are not dangerous but merely "mischievous" (*unfugstiftenden*), as Gerleman suggests, and so this verse must be "erotic playfulness," as John Snaith says.[220] The interference of these male courtiers in the relationship is really no threat at all, and it can be laughed away with some light teasing.[221]

While the major trend in Song scholarship is to read the foxes as courtiers of the

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[216] Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 122; Huwiler, "The Song of Songs," 260.

[217] Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 159–60. See also F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, Wisdom Commentary 25 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 54.

[218] Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth/Das Hohe Lied/Die Klagelieder*, 135.

[219] Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 112; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 114; Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 119.

[220] Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, 127; Snaith, *The Song of Songs*, 42.

[221] For more examples of this view, see Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 108–10; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 141; Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron*, 91–92; Good, *The Song of Songs*, 67–68; Adele Berlin, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, ed. Peter Machinist, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025), https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.17681865, 75–77.

woman, whether as ill-intentioned aggressors or as playful rapscallions, one other trend that is worthy of mention here sees the canines as various expressions of the desires of one or both of the lovers. Weems, for instance, reads the foxes' rummaging through the vineyards as the couple's "cunning stratagems to find opportunities to consummate their blossoming love while attempting simultaneously to avoid detection by others."[222] In this view, there are no third-party courtiers—just the two lovebirds secreting themselves away for an uninterrupted tryst. Similarly, for Garrett the foxes' movements indicate the couple's own playful "game" of "chase," a sign that they are "young, excited, and full of life."[223] Finally, Exum for her part reads the foxes as potential lovers, but rather than emphasizing their desire for her, she places the focus on the woman's desire to obtain a man. The verse in question does, after all, mention not only the foxes "ruining" the vineyard but also the speaker's aim to "catch" (אֶחֱזוּ) them: "to catch a fox for our very own (each of us, her own fox). These free and easy young men need to be caught, seized hold of and brought home."[224] This marks a striking reversal from the more common interpretation; instead of the foxes (men) going after the vineyards (women), it is the speaker (the woman) going after the foxes (men).[225]

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[222] Weems, "The Song of Songs," 394.

[223] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 160–61; see also Garrett, "Song of Songs," 394; Farley, *The Song of Songs*, 55–56.

[224] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 130; Morris Jastrow, Jr., *The Song of Songs, Being a Collection of Love Lyrics of Ancient Palestine* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1921), 178.

[225] Furthermore, Watson, *The Song of Songs*, 309, has recently offered two additional interpretive possibilities for שֻׁועָלִים based on possible cognates in other languages. First, he suggests, the Akk. word for "fox" (*šēlebu*) may refer more generally to any sort of agricultural pest, like locusts or birds, so it need not refer to foxes or jackals specifically. Second, שֻׁועָלִים could be an abbreviation of the Aram. phrase *ʿînbê tāʿlāʾ* or *ʿînbê tᵃʿᵃlāʾ* or the Syr. *ʿnby tʿlʾ*, which are related to the Akk. *karān šēlibi* and refer to the nightshade plant (*Solanum nigrum*), a weed in vineyards. As a result, the imperative אֶחֱזוּ would refer to uprooting and removing unwelcome plants among the grapevines. For my part, I admit these are certainly

Lion and Leopard

Hebrew	English	taxonomic name	references
אֲרִי	lion	*Panthera leo*	4:8
נָמֵר	leopard	*Panthera pardus*	4:8

אִתִּי מִלְּבָנוֹן כַּלָּה With me[226] from Lebanon, bride,
אִתִּי מִלְּבָנוֹן תָּבוֹאִי With me from Lebanon you will come.
תָּשׁוּרִי ׀ מֵרֹאשׁ אֲמָנָה You will travel from the peak of Amana,
מֵרֹאשׁ שְׂנִיר וְחֶרְמוֹן From the peak of Senir and Hermon,
מִמְּעֹנוֹת אֲרָיוֹת From the dens of lionesses,
מֵהַרְרֵי נְמֵרִים׃ From the mountains[227] of leopards. (4:8)

Lions and leopards appear in a single verse in Song of Songs. Song 4:8 locates the woman in the regions of the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges, to the north of the author's likely home in Palestine. Lebanon is mentioned here specifically, and the Anti-Lebanon mountains are identified piecemeal as Amana, Senir, and Hermon, which

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possible readings, but they do not make any more sense over against previous interpretations. It remains to be seen how Watson's suggestions will be received among Song scholars.

[226] This translation follows the MT's vocalization as אִתִּי. The targum; Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth/Das Hohe Lied/Die Klagelieder*, 147; Murphy, *The Song of Songs*, 155–56; Adele Berlin, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, ed. Peter Machinist, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025), https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.17681865, 108–9, support the MT's vocalization. *BHS* suggests vocalizing this as the verb אֱתִי ("Come!"). The LXX (Δεῦρο), the Vulgate (*veni*), and the Syriac (ܬܐ,) support this emendation; so also Robert and Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 168; Pope, *Song of Songs*, 474; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 133; Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron*, 26; P. W. T. Stoop-van Paridon, *The Song of Songs: A Philological Analysis of the Hebrew Book* שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים, Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement 17 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 220; as well as CEB, KJV, NIV, NRSVue, RSV, TNIV. 4QCant[b] has את ("you").

[227] Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth/Das Hohe Lied/Die Klagelieder*, 147–48; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 133; Garrett, "Song of Songs," 405 n. 99; Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 186 suggest emending the MT's מֵהַרְרֵי ("from the mountains of") to מֵחֹרֵי ("from the lairs of") in order to make it parallel to מִמְּעֹנוֹת ("from the dens of"). Cf. Nah 2:13, which also places these words parallel to each other (חֹרָיו וּמְעֹנֹתָיו, "his lairs and his dens"). (Pope, *Song of Songs*, 6; Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 154 also make this emendation, though without explanation.) Hess, *Song of Songs*, 113, in addition to the CEB, has "mountain lairs" (cf. "mountain haunts," NIV, TNIV), apparently providing both readings at once. However, the explicit reference to specific mountains earlier in this same verse seems to make this emendation unnecessary; as a consequence, most commentators retain the MT's text, as I have done here.

"probably designate the northern, middle, and southern parts of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range."[228] Though both cats are now regionally extinct in Lebanon today, they were certainly at home there in the first millennium BCE. Evidence of lions has been documented throughout Africa as well as parts of Asia and Europe,[229] and the leopard is "the most widely distributed wild cat species in the world."[230] Archaeological finds have turned up leopard skeletal remains in Lebanon specifically.[231] Thus, the author's choice of depicting these animals here is entirely fitting. The reason they are mentioned at all, however, is a matter of debate.

Scholars have offered a few different interpretations to explain the author's intention in naming the lion and leopard here. First, some scholars suggest that, as with the dove imagery in 2:14, these large cats indicate the woman's distance from the man and therefore further bear the theme of her inaccessibility. For Keel, this verse "offers an expressive presentation both of the woman's aloofness or unapproachability and of the man's power as he overcomes these things."[232] Where this distance is an obstacle to be surmounted for Keel, it is a marker of impossibility for Garrett: "he believes himself helpless and unable to attain her."[233] For F. Scott Spencer, "he has come to lure her away

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[228] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 158.

[229] Sarah K. Haas, Virginia Hayssen, and Paul R. Krausman, "Panthera leo," *Mammalian Species* 762 (2005): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504539.

[230] Andrew B. Stein and Virginia Hayssen, "Panthera pardus (Carnivora: Felidae)," *Mammalian Species* 45 (2013): 30–48, https://doi.org/10.1644/900.1, here 34.

[231] Dirk Albert Hooijer, *The Fossil Vertebrates of Ksâr'Akil, a Palaeolithic Rock Shelter in the Lebanon* (Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, 1961), 29–31.

[232] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 158; cf. Farley, *The Song of Songs*, 74–75.

[233] Garrett, "Song of Songs," 406; cf. Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 200.

from a remote lair."[234] Whether the man can reach her or not, the mere fact of her inaccessibility is what drives the man's desire; her distance emphasizes her beauty, desirability, and exoticism.[235] Her position in the "faraway, inaccessible, and lonely wilderness" gives her a wild and enticing allure.[236] If inaccessibility is the main theme of this verse, then the role of the lionesses and leopards would be to emphasize the locale; that is, the "dens of lionesses" and "mountains of leopards" serve as poetic synonyms of the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains already named in the verse.[237] In this reading, the big cats are parallels of the distant mountains and nothing more. However, the regions of Israel and Judah also had lions and leopards, so there is nothing special about them that would point solely to Lebanon. The specific place names (Lebanon, Amana, Senir, Hermon) point to the woman's distance from the man, but the lion and leopard need not carry the same connotation, as he could very likely find them in his own region as well. As a result, many scholars, including those who offer inaccessibility as one meaning of this verse, suggest that the author is aiming for something more.

A second interpretation explains the presence of these animals as wordplay.[238] In this view, the poem as a whole consists of 4:8—5:1, held together in part by the

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[234] Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 99.

[235] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 135.

[236] Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 154; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 135; cf. Bloch and Bloch, *The Song of Songs*, 174.

[237] Julius Boehmer, "Welchen Sinn hat Hohes Lied 4_8?", *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 80 (1936): 449–53, here 452; cf. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 80.

[238] See, e.g., Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 201; Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 135; Good, *The Song of Songs*, 86; Hess, *Song of Songs*, 140; and Segal, *The Song of Songs*, 115–16.

paronomasia of לְבָנוֹן ("Lebanon," 4:8, 11, 15) and לְבוֹנָה ("frankincense," 4:14). Fox goes on to suggest further puns, such as אֲרָיוֹת ("lionesses," 4:8) and אָרִיתִי ("I have gathered or plucked," 5:1) as well as נְמֵרִים ("leopards," 4:8) and מֹר ("myrrh," 4:14; 5:1).[239] Some of these puns, including Fox's less compelling suggestion of ראשׁ ("peak," 4:8) and שָׂמִים ("spices," 4:10, 14; 5:1), would form a nice inclusio around the entire poem as they appear in its opening and closing verses.

The third interpretation, and the most common, often appears alongside these other two and says that these animals represent danger.[240] This reading makes a lot of sense given the Hebrew Bible's frequent association of lions with predation, including on humans (Num 23:24; 1 Kgs 13:24, 26; 20:36; 2 Kgs 17:25–26; Isa 31:4; Jer 2:30; 5:6; Ezek 19:6; 22:25; Hos 13:7; Amos 3:4, 12; Mic 5:7; Pss 7:3; 17:12; 22:14; 104:21; Prov 22:13; Job 38:39–40; Dan 6:25).[241] Leopards appear less frequently in the Hebrew Bible, though they too are characterized by their prey drive (Jer 5:6; Hos 13:7), and archaeology has uncovered leopard traps used for human protection in the Negeb.[242] The precise sort of danger these cats represent and to whom it is directed are debatable. For a few

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[239] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 135.

[240] A fourth interpretation, historically uncommon and mostly abandoned today, follows the *hieros gamos* trend of Song interpretation and suggests that the lionesses and leopards represent the divinity of the woman. For advocates of this view, see Alfred Bertholet, "Zur Stelle Hohes Lied 4^8," in *Abhandlungen zur semitischen Religionskunde und Sprachwissenschaft: Wolf Wilhelm Grafen von Baudissin zum 26. September 1917 überreicht von Freunden und Schülern*, ed. Wilhelm Frankenberg and Friedrich Küchler, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 33 (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1918), 47–53; Meek, Kerr, and Kerr, "The Song of Songs," 123; and Pope, *Song of Songs*, 477. For more recent mentions of this possibility, see Exum, *Song of Songs*, 169; Good, *The Song of Songs*, 86–87. I discuss Exum's unique of this verse in more detail in ch. 5.

[241] For more information, see Brent A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis (Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press, 2005), 35–36.

[242] Firmage, "Zoology (Fauna)," 6:1143.

commentators, the carnivores symbolize the dangers of foreign peoples;[243] for others, courtiers that compete with the man for the woman's affection.[244] Hess suggests that they represent danger specifically to the man, emphasizing her inaccessibility by adding a layer of predatory peril to her already mentioned distance.[245] For most scholars, however, the big cats are dangers to the woman. In this reading, the woman faces the threat of "hostile surroundings,"[246] and the mountain peaks she inhabits are "peculiarly ominous places."[247] In some cases, the lovers must flee this danger together,[248] and in other cases the man seems to implicitly represent a mode of escape for the woman as he encourages her to "flee forthwith from such a dangerous place."[249] In most of these readings, the lionesses and leopards symbolize danger to the woman *qua* human—Stadelman, for instance, mentions the need for "an escort of armed men," fellow humans to protect the lover in an area "heavily forested and infested" with predators.[250] Feliks, however, sees a continuation of the Song's prior deer metaphor, so that these carnivores imperil the woman *qua* doe, who is thus in need of protection by her buck lover: "He is equipped

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[243] Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 211; Robert and Tournay, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*, 171–73. Cf. Song Rabbah 4:8.

[244] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 158.

[245] Hess, *Song of Songs*, 140–41.

[246] Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 29.

[247] Weems, "The Song of Songs," 403. For more examples of this reading, see Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 15; Falk, *The Song of Songs*, 182; Huwiler, "The Song of Songs," 270; Longman, *Song of Songs*, 150; and Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, 193.

[248] Weems, "The Song of Songs," 403.

[249] Waterman, *The Song of Songs*, 77. In contrast to both of these views, Graetz, *Schir Ha-Schirim*, 159–60 stands out in reading Song 4:8 as an invitation *into* danger rather than away from it.

[250] Stadelman, *Love and Politics*, 118.

wholly to shield her even from the horrendous lion and leopard that would, snarling, rend her beauteous flesh."[251] The nature of the danger varies, but this remains a common and compelling interpretation.

[251] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 15. I discuss Feliks's expanded view of the Song's deer metaphor further in ch. 3.

CHAPTER 3: G(R)AZING: SEEING AND BEING ANIMAL

Introduction: The Gaze in Scholarship on the Song

The love poetry of the Song of Songs is replete with descriptions of each lover's appearance and, as a result, the topic of the gaze—of seeing these lovers' appearances—is quite significant for scholars of this text.[1] A few scholars have examined in some depth the act of seeing in the Song. For example, David Clines[2] and Donald Polaski[3] have considered the topic of the male gaze, and Cheryl Exum distinguishes between a "gaze"

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[1] The eyes' capacity for sight and their effect on the person seen is a common motif in the Song. At a purely grammatical level, a number of people and things are subjects who see: the woman (6:10), the daughters of Jerusalem (1:6 [despite the masculine plural form of the verb תִּרְאוּנִי here, the subject is likely the daughters of Jerusalem; see Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb936wk, 126; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 99]; 6:9; perhaps 7:1 [commentators are more unsure about the masculine plural תֶּחֱזוּ in this verse]), in addition to the sun (1:6) and a tower (7:5). Though not the grammatical subject, the man is a seeing agent in his demand for the woman's visibility in 2:14. Objects of vision include the man (3:3; 5:10), the woman (1:6 [on the "double-gaze" of the sun and the daughters of Jerusalem, see F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, Wisdom Commentary 25 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 16]; 2:14; 6:9), Solomon (3:11), as well as land and flora (2:12; 6:11; 7:13). Apart from simply looking and seeing, a gaze in the Song can have a powerful effect on its recipient: it can ravish or seduce (4:9) or even overwhelm a person (6:5).

[2] David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?", in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 201 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 118–19: "the woman is everywhere constructed as the object of male gaze," which, he asserts, "is the very stuff of pornography." Clines sees the woman of the Song as entirely the product of a male creator, so that any viewpoint that the woman appears to express for herself is really just what the male poet would like for a woman to say.

[3] For Donald Polaski the male gaze is a serious issue in the poem, "having almost complete, if not total, access to the female's body" (Donald C. Polaski, "'What Will Ye See in the Shulammite?': Women, Power and Panopticism in the Song of Songs," *Biblical Interpretation* 5 [1997]: 64–81, https://doi.org/10.1163/156851597X00049, here 72–73), for instance in the man's voyeurism in looking through the woman's window in 2:9 (p. 73) and the woman's internalization of the panoptic male gaze which has resulted in her constitution as a disciplined subject (pp. 76–81). What many perceive as this woman's freedom, then, becomes simply another expression of her captivity within patriarchal power regimes.

that is "voyeuristic" and a more benign "look" that is instead "erotic."[4] In addition, Elaine James has examined the gaze in the Song through the concept of landscape, emphasizing the mutual care of land for its inhabitants and vice versa in the image of the "young woman-as-landscape."[5]

What remains largely unexamined in these scholars' treatments of the gaze in the Song is the curious fact that the gazing subjects and the objects of their sight aren't always entirely human. To be sure, all commentators acknowledge that the Song deploys nonhuman animal comparisons, but rarely do they allow these animalizations to affect their interpretations of the nature of the lovers' gaze. As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, these amorous animal metaphors often seem normalized to readers,

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[4] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 22–23. For her, the voyeuristic gaze is "objectifying and controlling," in contrast to the erotic look, which "preserves the mystery, the otherness, of the other through figuration." Exum seems to lean more toward the less threatening erotic look as a fitting description of how the man and woman in the Song relate to one another, but she leaves it for readers to "decide for themselves" how they interpret the lovers (p. 24). Elsewhere, Exum returns to the gaze and, relying on Laura Mulvey's insights from film theory (Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 [1975]: 6–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6], argues that "there are ethical implications of the way we look at things," but the Song's gaze is significant because it is not one-sided but rather mutual (J. Cheryl Exum, "Song of Solomon," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics, vol. 2: Mag–Zep*, ed. Robert L. Brawley [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 303).

I should note that while Clines, Polaski, and Exum speak of voyeurism and/or pornography pejoratively, it need not be so. See Stone's response in Ken Stone, "Pleasure and Danger in Biblical Interpretation: Food, Sex and Women in 2 Samuel 13 and the Song of Songs," in *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective*, Queering Theology Series (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 106–7; on assumptions about "good" and "bad" sex and the possibility of "counterpleasures," see Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore, "Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003): 24–52, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685150360495561.

[5] Elaine T. James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs: Poetry and Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190619015.001.0001, 121. Whereas Mulvey presents woman as seen and man as seer, James suggests that this is too essentializing, and film criticism may not be the best tool for studying ANE poetry anyway (James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 123). This identification of the woman with landscape might initially seem objectifying, but James repeatedly notes throughout her book how land both constitutes and is constituted by humans. Humans must cultivate and care for the land in order to survive, and they are in turn shaped by what the land provides. She concludes, "The kind and quality of vision that draws the young woman's beauty in terms of the land of Israel is a vision of affection, of memory, and is reminiscent of a long-term experience in a particular topography" (James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 150).

but what if we looked at them anew and plumbed the depths of their possible implications? For instance, what does it mean to look longingly at your beloved and envision him as a gazelle? And conversely, what does it mean to be looked at by an animal?

In this chapter, I examine some of the gazelle/deer imagery of the Song (particularly 2:8–9, 16–17; 8:14) alongside biblical scholarship, animal studies, and visual art. In the first section, I explore the depiction in Song 2:8–9 of the woman gazing at her beloved and imagining him as a gazelle or deer. This animalization, rather than *detracting* from the sensuality of the scene, actually *emphasizes* it. Second, I examine the beloved's reciprocal gaze in 2:9, where he, imagined as an animal, looks back at the woman. Next, drawing on insights from Jacques Derrida, I ask what these gazes *do*. For most commentators and artists, the woman remains human even as she imagines her lover as a gazelle/deer, creating a portrayal of cross-species romance. For one scholar, however, the gazes exchanged by the two lovers go further and make *her* a gazelle as well. Throughout this chapter, my argument is aided by a few modern illustrations of this passage that demonstrate the multiple ways that species can be figured. The artists of these works are not united by any particular feature apart from the subject matter they are illustrating, but along with biblical scholars, they provide fascinating interpretations of this material.

"Hart" Throb: The Woman Sees Her Beloved as a Deer/Gazelle

Song 2:8–9 begins a new passage in the text, with the lovers initially separated but longing to join each other:

קֹ֣ול דֹּודִ֔י	The voice of my beloved!
הִנֵּה־זֶ֖ה בָּ֑א	Behold, he comes,
מְדַלֵּג֙ עַל־הֶ֣הָרִ֔ים	Leaping over the mountains,
מְקַפֵּ֖ץ עַל־הַגְּבָעֹֽות׃	Bounding over the hills.
דֹּומֶ֤ה דֹודִי֙ לִצְבִ֔י	My beloved is like a gazelle
אֹ֖ו לְעֹ֣פֶר הָאַיָּלִ֑ים	Or a fawn of the deer.
הִנֵּה־זֶ֤ה עֹומֵד֙ אַחַ֣ר כָּתְלֵ֔נוּ	Behold, he stands behind our wall,
מַשְׁגִּ֙יחַ֙ מִן־הַֽחַלֹּנֹ֔ות	Gazing from the windows,
מֵצִ֖יץ מִן־הַחֲרַכִּֽים׃	Peering from the lattices.

The woman appears to be in her home or in a building of some sort, based on her position behind “windows” or a “wall.” In 2:8, she announces the approach of her lover, noting first his voice (“the voice of my beloved,” קֹול דֹּודִי), followed by the sight of his form, introduced with הִנֵּה (“look,” “behold”).[6] The imagery that follows indicates that the female speaker is describing what she sees: her beloved is coming, but not slowly or lackadaisically. Rather, in her mind, he is “leaping” and “bounding” (2:8) like “a gazelle or a fawn of the deer” (2:9).

In this scene, one might first ask the question of *why* the woman would imagine her beloved as a gazelle. Biblical scholars have their own answers to this: the primary basis of comparison that commentators identify is that of speed. The man’s approach is urgent and excited, mimicking the quick locomotion of a gazelle.[7] This seems to be precisely what James Reid has in mind in his rendering of the beloved’s approach, found

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[6] Scholars note that the Hebrew particle הִנֵּה need not be read explicitly as a visual marker, but it does communicate, as James suggests, “[t]he visual nature of the Song” together with “the evocation of the lovers’ presence” (*Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 122). See also Exum, *Song of Songs*, 112:

> The particle *hinnēh* (KJV, “behold”) invites its addressee to look, along with the speaker, and see what he sees from his point of view: the man is asking his lover to see herself through his eyes. She asks the same of him, praising him in terms that echo his praise of her. With *hinnēh*, the poet directs the reader’s gaze as well, creating the illusion of immediacy by bringing what the lovers see immediately before our eyes.

[7] See, e.g., Paul Joüon, *Le Cantique des Cantiques: Commentaire philologique et exégétique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1909), 163–64; S. M. Lehrman, “The Song of Songs,” in *The Five Megilloth: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, ed. A. Cohen, Soncino Books of the Bible (London:

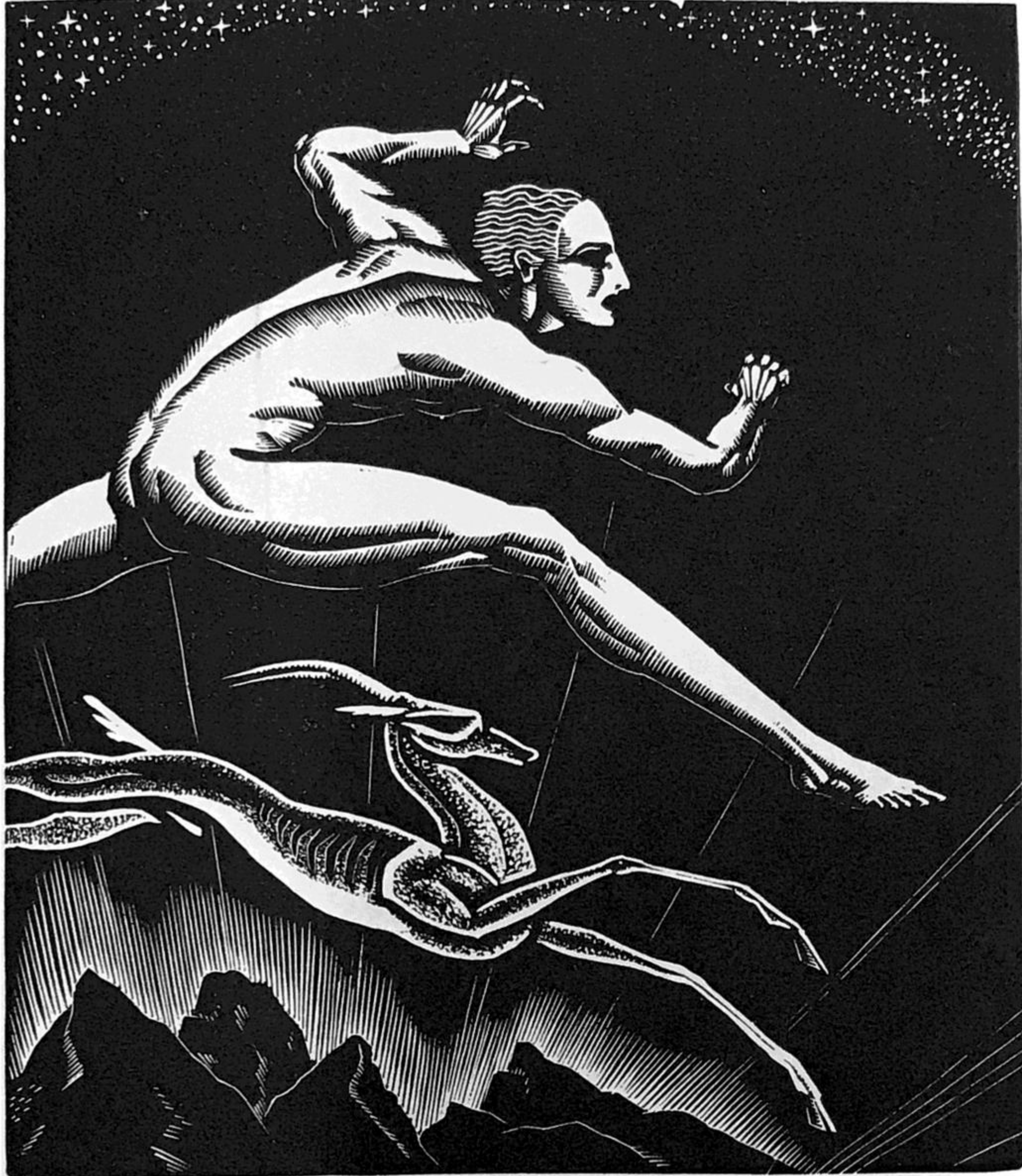

Figure 1. James Reid, *The Song of Songs with Woodcuts* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931).

in his 1931 collection of woodcuts based on the Song of Songs (Figure 1). The image captures his form in mid-leap, his legs spread wide and his hair swept back in a snapshot of rapid movement. At his side a gazelle bounds elegantly forward with outstretched legs.

Soncino, 1959), 7; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7C (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 390.

The portrayal of the man and the gazelle together here obviously invites a comparison, and one can see at the outset how they are both in motion, which coheres well with most biblical scholars' reading of speed in this passage. I suggest, however, that speed is not all that we see. The man is nude (and we might observe the gazelle is too), so Reid seems also to be inviting the viewer to compare not only their movement but also their forms.

Creases and stark shadows appear on the man, outlining his well-defined musculature, especially on his legs, and we see similar features in the gazelle's legs, giving them both an athletic appearance. The outline of a penis seems to protrude from the gazelle's groin, evoking its sexual connotations. In contrast, the man's penis is coyly hidden, but one may certainly be drawn to imagine it via the gazelle's member; after all, the text of the Song frequently avoids explicit anatomical terminology in favor of suggestive metaphors.[8] Reid's depiction of the man's and gazelle's similar forms also fits the strength and beauty that biblical scholars occasionally identify as the point of comparison here; for instance, Exum calls the gazelle/deer metaphor an "image of sexual energy."[9] Indeed, the Hebrew word for a male gazelle (צְבִי-II) is a homonym of the identical word that means "beauty" (צְבִי-I),[10] so there is an obvious lexical reason why the poet may have chosen this animal for love poetry.[11]

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[8] For more on this, see M. L. Case, "Cunning Linguists: Oral Sex in the Song of Songs," *Vetus Testamentum* 67 (2017): 171–86, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12341277.

[9] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 122. See also Duane A. Garrett, "The Song of Songs," in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 159.

[10] See *CDCH*, s.v. צְבִי-I.

[11] As Patrick Hunt notes, "the stag is also the very epitome of deep lascivious desire" (*Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, Studies in Biblical Literature 96 [New York: Peter Lang, 2008], 149).

Figure 2. Phillip Ratner, in M. Basil Pennington, *The Song of Songs: A Spiritual Commentary* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Path, 2004), 23.

Phillip Ratner's 2004 illustration of the man in the woman's imaginary (Figure 2) also emphasizes form and beauty in an uncommon but rather creative interpretation of this passage. Ratner's image seems to ignore the beloved's approach entirely, instead depicting him passively standing at the window, already indoors, with his gaze instead

directed outside.[12] By locating the man on the interior of the wall, Ratner has envisioned a situation that most commentators do not consider. Because he is facing outward here, his sight is not trained on the woman, so he becomes completely the object of her gaze. Scholars have long spoken about the power of the gaze: its potential for gaining or demonstrating one's dominance over someone, especially when aligned with masculinity.[13] But by holding him in her vision, *she* has the power. Thus, Ratner illustrates James's insight on these verses: "In this way, the poem destabilizes its own gender roles: […] the young woman is the source of the only real action of the poem, which is description. It is her voice that animates her lover."[14] The woman transforms her beloved's body, through her imagination, figuring him as something of a centaur, having the partial form of a deer. The ornate lattice work on the windows aids her imagination, giving him the semblance of a rack of antlers. His is not the only "rack" that is visible here: the woman is also nude, but she is portrayed to the side, only in profile and partially obscured by the framing of the piece—indeed, as her body stretches across the entire left side, one can say she *is* part of the frame for the piece. The woman is here only to show that she is present and is the active looker. The man, the object of her gaze, is the focus of

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[12] This location is actually a clever way of reading a pronoun that has troubled scholars: specifically, 2:9 says that the man is standing not "behind *my* wall" or "behind *the* wall" but rather "behind *our* wall" (emphasis added) (כָּתְלֵנוּ). The identification of this "our" in "our wall" is a matter of debate. The approach of the beloved and his gazing through the window seems incompatible with a wall that already belongs to both of the man and the woman. If this wall is under shared ownership between the pair, why need the man stand outside and look through the window? Shouldn't he just let himself in? Ratner solves this issue by placing the man already inside; the wall does indeed belong to both of them.

[13] Particularly influential here is the work on the gaze in Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.". For Mulvey, women in film demonstrates "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (11), but man is the "bearer of the look" (12).

[14] James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 19. Cf. Stone, "Pleasure and Danger in Biblical Interpretation," 102–3.

the illustration and the recipient of her transformative vision. She vividly imagines the hindlegs of a deer, relishing in his muscles and the power they contain. The plump and inviting hindquarters of both the human man and the spectral deer add to the scene's sexual energy. In contrast to much of the pejorative rhetoric that involves animalization and sexuality, both in the Hebrew Bible and beyond,[15] this animalization of his body does not *detract* from his sexiness but rather *highlights* it. Human and nonhuman sexuality meet as she gazes upon him and uses this power to metamorphose him, using ungulate imagery to heighten the eroticism of the moment.

In this scene of the man as gazelle/deer peering through the lattice, there is first of all the question of why the woman would imagine her beloved as a gazelle. Biblical scholars have their own answers to this: the comparison is an "image of sexual energy"[16] highlighting the "beauty and grace as well as strength"[17] of the animal. These scholars often assume that the author has substituted this tenor (sexual fervor and beauty) with the vehicle (the gazelle/deer) for ornamental reasons, so the reader simply must undo this substitution in order to interpret the simile. However, recalling Max Black's interaction theory of metaphor, we must admit that there may be more to it.[18] If the comparison casts the man as gazelle/deer-like, then we must also admit that it simultaneously casts the gazelle/deer as man-like. By applying the graceful aesthetics of these animals to her man,

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[15] See above p. 10.

[16] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 122.

[17] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 159.

[18] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 25–47.

the woman implies that there perhaps is something sexy about the gazelle/deer as well.

The Male Gaze(lle): The Animal Gazes at Her

The woman is the main speaker in 2:8–9 and thus is the primary viewer, but an important feature arises in 2:9—she does not simply *gaze*, but rather she is *gazed upon* as well. In fact, her appearance as the object of her beloved's gaze is part of her own narration: she imagines herself being seen by her animalized lover. She describes him "gazing from the windows, looking from the lattices" (מַשְׁגִּיחַ מִן־הַחַלֹּנוֹת מֵצִיץ מִן־הַחֲרַכִּים). Othmar Keel observes, "During the leaping and jumping, the woman is the observer, but now that the beloved stands behind her wall, she is the one observed. The intensity of his gaze is emphasized by using plural forms for both the windows and the lattices (which cover the larger openings)."[19]

Salvador Dalí's 1971 illustration of this scene (Figure 3) portrays the man's gaze quite nicely. It seems that her cervid beloved has completed his bounding-and-leaping approach and is now viewing the woman's form through the wall as she gazes back. The beloved's visible eye is wide, clearly entranced by the sight of his lover. Elsewhere in the poem, the beloved will claim to be "seduced" (לִבַּבְתִּנִי, 4:9; cf. "ravished" NRSVue, "captured" NJPS) and "overwhelm[ed]" (הִרְהִיבֻנִי, 6:5) when her gaze meets his, and Dalí's depiction even shows the man salivating, emphasizing how his lover has so thoroughly enraptured him. She has made of him a beast, whose visible lust is barely under control.

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[19] Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 98.

Figure 3. Salvador Dalí, "The Beloved Looks Forth Like a Roe" (1971).

Another feature of Dalí's interpretation here is its challenge to the dichotomy between city and nature. Many commentators read this scene taking place within a town, as this is a likely place for things like walls and windows to exist. But Dalí's wall is jagged and broken, perhaps worn and weathered by the natural forces. Grass has grown on the woman's side of the wall, so the outside has already come inside. Indeed, nature

takes over even the bodies of the man and the woman themselves, as the deer's skin is covered not in fur but rather in what looks like plant matter. In addition, the deer's antlers rise and twist more like tree branches than a buck's typical head adornment. Nature has bled into culture here; it has blurred the line where the human ends and flora and fauna begin.

Likewise, the woman's body has blades of grass sprouting from it, inviting her beloved to not only *gaze* but also to *graze*, an act which comes to be a sexual euphemism a few verses later in this same passage (2:16; cf. 6:3). The similarity of "gazing" and "grazing" is a poetic pun that works just as well in English as in Hebrew; Spencer shows that there is a "homophonic link" between the verbs רעה (to graze, pasture) and ראה (to see), in addition to רַעְיָה (darling, love), the pet name that the man frequently uses to refer to the woman (1:9, 15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4).[20] Here, in this poetic *mélange*, eating, seeing, and romance all coincide.

The choice of animal who gazes in this poetic image becomes quite significant here. As I've mentioned, Song 2:16 and Dalí's illustration both communicate a desire to eat, to feed, to graze:

דּוֹדִ֥י לִי֙ וַאֲנִ֣י ל֔וֹ My beloved is mine and I am his,
הָרֹעֶ֖ה בַּשּׁוֹשַׁנִּֽים׃ The one who grazes among the lotuses.

Given the erotic charge of this culinary image, we might even translate this into English idiom by suggesting that the beloved's alimentary action entails eating her out.[21] But even as his face betrays his voracious desire to feast on his lover, the cervid metaphor

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[20] Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 22.

[21] Cf. Case, "Cunning Linguists."

itself indicates that this act of eating is not coercive or harmful but rather entirely welcome. How different might his desire to feed be if she had envisioned her beloved as a predatory mammal? Predators do appear in the Song (foxes in 2:15 and lions and leopards in 4:8), and they often are read as competing lovers.[22] And if he were such an animal, we might see the metaphor take on the rhetoric of hunting, with all its concomitant violence. Indeed, hunting and masculinity have a close association, both in the ANE and in the modern U.S., so hunting serves as a common literary analogy for amorous pursuits. The poet had every opportunity to portray this man as an emblem of what Jacques Derrida calls "carnivorous virility,"[23] that toxic combination of masculinity, violence, and meat-eating. Nevertheless, the woman's imagination fashions not a predator but rather a gazelle or deer—a prey animal. The primary feature of her beloved that leads her to imagine him as this animal in the first place—his quick, bounding movement—is an evolutionary adaptation precisely to avoid predators.[24] As a result, whereas the gaze of her beloved could potentially have the dominating and controlling qualities of the male gaze, she casts him instead as a benign and even vulnerable animal, with her own body as the grass he eats. His eyes exude the gentle and nonthreatening gaze of a herbivore—and more importantly, a romantic partner.[25]

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[22] See the discussions of those animals in chap. 2 above, and see chap. 5 of this dissertation for more on predators.

[23] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject," in *Points…: Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 280.

[24] Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, gazelles and deer are associated with being hunted (Isa 13:14; Lam 1:6; cf. Prov 6:5) and being eaten (Deut 12:15, 22; 14:5; 15:22; 1 Kgs 4:23), and when they are used metaphorically as descriptors of humans, it is their speed and movement that is the main point of comparison (2 Sam 2:18; Isa 35:6; 1 Chr 12:9). For more, see the discussion of "Gazelle and Deer" in chap. 2 above.

[25] This is of course not to say that herbivorous species are entirely passive or nonviolent. Ungulate

Let's return to the animal's gaze itself. In "Why Look at Animals?" John Berger argues that modern industrial capitalist society has forgotten what it means to be seen by an animal. Through technologies like photography, he says, "animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance."[26] Similarly, at a zoo, guests "proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next or the one after next,"[27] but something is always not quite right about the zoo because "you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal."[28] And yet, in this scene in the Song, the woman is enclosed within a room, and, in a situation resembling the reverse of a zoo, the deer approaches her window to peer in at her.

What, then, might it mean to come back to an awareness of being observed by an animal? What does it mean to be gazed upon by a deer? Jacques Derrida ponders just these sorts of question in his book *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (*L'animal que donc je suis*). He introduces his discourse on animals and the history of philosophy with an autobiographical narrative about himself standing naked in his bathroom in full view of

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males, for instance, are known to battle each other for territory or mating prospects; see Heinrich Mendelssohn, Yoram Yom-Tov, and Colin P. Groves, "Gazella gazella," *Mammalian Species* 490 (1995): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.2307/0.490.1, here 5; Steven C. Kingswood and David A. Blank, "Gazella subgutturosa," *Mammalian Species* 518 (1996): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504241, here 7; George A. Feldhamer, Kelly C. Farris-Renner, and Celeste M. Barker, "Dama dama," *Mammalian Species* 317 (1988): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504141, here 5; Antoine J. Sempéré, Vladimir E. Sokolov, and Aleksey A. Danilkin, "Capreolus capreolus," *Mammalian Species* 538 (1996): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504309, here 4–5. Within the Hebrew Bible corpus, however, the dominant associations of these animals relate to their status as prey for humans (as meat or as speedy prey), not to their aggressiveness for land or mates.

[26] John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 14.

[27] Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", 21.

[28] Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", 22.

his cat.[29] His position as the seeing *subject* has been destabilized by becoming the *object* of a nonhuman animal's sight, the gaze of his cat. By not being the first to see, by realizing only after the fact that the cat's gaze is trained on him, his own subjectivity can be said to follow from the cat's—hence the pun in the book's title, *je suis* being both "I am" and "I follow." Derrida takes this destabilizing encounter with his cat as a point of departure in understanding nonhuman animals in philosophy: "the gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human."[30] The gaze of the Song's gazelle, then, is not that of an unthinking automaton but rather of a cognizant subject, a nonhuman being with its own inner life. Carey Walsh says of Song 2:9, "For the woman, there is in the gazelle's eyes, a someone there."[31] Even as an animal, a subject peers back at her.

By imagining herself being seen by her beloved as a gazelle or deer, what then becomes of the woman's humanity within Derrida's "abyssal limit of the human"?[32] In the next two sections, I discuss two possibilities for the effect of the man's gaze: one in which she remains human but possesses a love that crosses the species boundary, and one in which this gaze transforms her into a gazelle or deer with her beloved.

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[29] He describes the scene by stating, "Un animal me regarde" (Jacques Derrida, *L'Animal que donc je suis* [Paris: Galilée, 2006], 21; see also Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy [New York: Fordham University Press, 2008], 6), a statement which literally means "An animal looks at me" but also exploits a double meaning in French to produce the meaning "An animal concerns me" (cf. English "regarding"). There is something to the animal's look that goes beyond mere eyesight, that says something about humanity. Cf. also Élisabeth de Fontenay, *Quand un animal te regarde* (Paris: Gallimard Jeunesse, 2006), a book on animals that also exploits this pun.

[30] Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 13. Derrida goes on divide the history of philosophy into two camps: those who have truly been seen by the animal and those who haven't.

[31] Carey Walsh, "The Wisdom of Animals in the Song of Songs," in *The Song of Songs in Its Context: Words for Love, Love for Words*, ed. Pierre Van Hecke, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 310 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1q26kv6.32, 598.

[32] Has she become a philosopher, from the camp that Derrida would prefer?

In “Hind”sight: The Woman as Human

For most biblical scholars, the question of the woman’s humanity and subjectivity never comes up. Typically, she is read unproblematically as a human woman employing metaphor to describe her loved one, and because in a modernist understanding metaphor is typically not much more than a rhetorical flourish, there is no underlying importance to the choices her imagination makes. But if she is truly envisioning her beloved as another mammal, let’s unpack what that might mean.

Returning to James Reid, in one of his woodcuts (Figure 4), he portrays the woman sitting nude, embracing a deer.[33] It’s not initially clear how one should read the image, as her pose could arguably be seen as that of a shepherd or animal caretaker. Indeed, the Song portrays the woman as a shepherd in 1:7–8, and Reid provides an illustration of this elsewhere, in which she is also nude and holding a lamb. However, this illustration is located in Reid’s book immediately next to a quotation of Song 8:14, another passage in which the woman imagines her beloved as a deer:

בְּרַ֣ח ׀ דּוֹדִ֗י	Flee, my beloved,
וּֽדְמֵה־לְךָ֤ לִצְבִי֙	And be like a gazelle
א֚וֹ לְעֹ֣פֶר הָאַיָּלִ֔ים	Or a fawn of the deer
עַ֖ל הָרֵ֥י בְשָׂמִֽים׃	On the mountains of spices.

Following the logic of Reid’s woodcut and the verse from Song that it accompanies, I suggest that the best reading of this image is as a depiction of the woman embracing her

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[33] For viewers from an American context, the spots on this deer may also betray its youth, as fawns of the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) are initially spotted but lose their spots when they reach adulthood. If this is a young animal, then, this might confirm that she is indeed its caretaker. Ancient Syria-Palestine did not have white-tailed deer, of course; instead, the fallow deer (*Dama dama*) is one of the main cervid species for the place and time of the Song’s composition, and the menil variety of fallow deer has spots well into adulthood, and only males have antlers. See George A. Feldhamer, Kelly C. Farris-Renner, and Celeste M. Barker, “Dama dama,” *Mammalian Species* 317 (1988): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.2307/3504141, here 1.

Figure 4. James Reid, *The Song of Songs with Woodcuts* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931).

lover in the form of a deer.

The oddity of this scene, then, in both the text of the Song and all the images I've discussed so far, goes unnoticed for most scholars.[34] As we've seen, Ratner has shown the human woman gazing longingly at her sweeth(e)art, and Dalí has shown the beloved as a deer gazing longingly at the human woman, but now Reid seems to be showing the

[34] In a rare moment of scholarly discomfort with this scene, we see in the NRSVue how the translators have interpreted the beloved's "grazing" (הָרֹעֶה) in 2:16 as shepherding instead. They are clearly reading this verse as an erotic euphemism and so either don't or can't conceive of the man as both deer and lover. As a result, they transform him back into his human self for this single verse, after which he goes back to being a gazelle leaping on mountains in 2:17.

couple not simply gazing at each other but even in the process of consummating their love. To be perfectly clear, *this a deer and a human embracing each other erotically*. The love in the Song that Jews and Christians have celebrated now for millennia is represented here as a love that crosses the boundary of species. In all these images so far, then, the humanity of the woman and the ungulate-ness of the man do not entail any contradiction as far as their love is concerned. She can remain human even as she imagines her beloved as a nonhuman.

Fear of the erotic intermingling of two different species appears in the ancient world as in our own.[35] Bestiality entails, on the one hand, a possible threat of diminishing the status of the human over and above the nonhuman.[36] In the Song, however, the human is inseparable from the nonhuman, even in sex. Interspecies intercourse also might, on the other hand, entail the threat of producing monstrous offspring. In order to maintain human supremacy, one must be, as Kathy Rudy argues, "disgusted by breaches of that boundary, most especially around the issue of sex."[37] The Song, however, isn't very concerned with reproduction at all, much less with the danger of hybrid children. This love that springs from the woman's imagination is thus fully a cross-species love.

"Deer"ly Beloved: The Woman as Deer/Gazelle

Every commentator notices how the woman's poetic words change her beloved, but few

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[35] See Exod 22:19; Lev 18:22–23; 20:15–16; Deut 27:21.

[36] See, e.g., Erica Fudge, "Monstrous Acts: Bestiality in Early Modern England," *History Today* 50 (2000): 20–25.

[37] Kathy Rudy, "LGBTQ…Z?", *Hypatia* 27 (2012): 601–15, here 607.

consider how her gazelle/deer metaphor might actually change *herself* as well. In this vein, Yehuda Feliks has a unique reading. He observes, as I have, that "the [male] lover undergoes a metamorphosis, so to speak, and is transformed into a hart," but he goes on to suggest that the effect of this transformation is to change the woman as well: "the maiden, herself likened now to a hind, hears the scurrying hooves of the hart, in which the love-urge had been aroused."[38] Thus, not only is the man a deer, but her imagination has also made a deer of her.

I have not found an artistic rendering that interprets this passage precisely in this way. But Yehuda Feliks's commentary has many images of deer and gazelles throughout—sometimes families, sometimes individuals. Many times, these images seem to be simply depictions of what the Song's various animals look like rather than illustrations of specific scenes or passages. Two images might exhibit this reading (Figure 5): a photograph of a pair of deer appearing to kiss[39] and an illustration of a male and female gazelle together.[40] These seem to me to be representative of the Song's lovers.

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[38] Yehuda Feliks, *Song of Songs: Nature Epic and Allegory* (Jerusalem: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1983), 13–14. The presence of the artifacts of city life in the passage, then, are not due to the woman being a human who lives in the city; rather, the pair of lovers, both deer, have approached human dwellings under the spell of love: "It is well-known that, at rutting time, these otherwise timid creatures cast aside all sense of caution, and, drunk with desire as they are, wander far afield, even approaching the habitations of men in their pursuit of the hinds" (p. 14; see also p. 56). In spite of Feliks's confident assertion, I'm not sure how "well-known" this truly is, but perhaps he is right that this metaphor derives from the poet's own experience of witnessing amorous deer up close.

[39] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 39. Feliks does not cite the photographer. This photo is captioned with a quotation from Song 1:2. Though the specific gazelle/deer metaphor from ch. 2 is not directly connected to this image, it is clear that he (or his editor) sees these two deer as representative of the Song's two lovers.

[40] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 55. Feliks's citations of his images are not clear. Like the photo, this image is captioned with a different verse (here, 2:7). The species called the mountain gazelle (*Gazella gazella*) is sexually dimorphous, with males and females having horns of different sizes (Mendelssohn, Yom-Tov, and Groves, "Gazella gazella," 2).

Figure 5. Photographer and artist not credited, in Yehuda Feliks, *Song of Songs: Nature Epic and Allegory* (Jerusalem: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1983), 39 and 55.

By turning the woman into a gazelle along with the man, Feliks (and these images) possibly provide a way to circumvent the threats of bestiality that I outlined in the previous section. If both the lovers are gazelles, then no interspecies intercourse happens. But the boundary between the species is equally unstable in this reading. Rather than the lovers' *affection* crossing this boundary, it is the woman *herself* who does so. She has imagined her beloved as a gazelle gazing back at her, and by being caught in the animal's gaze, as Derrida would agree, her own identity as a human is thrown into question. Though Exum does not share this interpretation, she makes an apt comment:

"Neither lover constructs the other without being affected themselves."[41]

Conclusion

We see in the Song's gazelle/deer imagery the woman's construction of her beloved as an animal and his own gaze returned toward her. The woman's viewpoint is highlighted throughout, and when she gives the man a gaze, it is a herbivorous one. For some readers and artists, she can remain a human but with a love that crosses the line dividing the two species, and for another, she herself crosses that line, becoming a gazelle along with her beloved. The gender representations here and the passage's blurring of the lines of humanity and animality provide fascinating food for thought—something, perhaps, to graze on.

[41] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 23. She goes on: "The bodies of the lovers are created through the way in which each is imagined by the other and in relation to the other" (24).

CHAPTER 4: THE PASTURE AND THE BATTLEFIELD: DOMESTIC MAMMALS IN THE SONG OF SONGS[1]

Introduction

Animal studies scholars have shown that domestication is not simply a one-sided exchange in which one party dominates the other, as it is often characterized. Donna Haraway in particular has spoken of "[c]o-constitutive companion species," that is, species that become who they are in relation to other species.[2] In Haraway's example, it is not the case that humans merely trapped wolves and over time formed dogs out of them; rather, humans and dogs co-evolved, each affecting and forming the other. Humans would not be who they are without dogs, who evolved alongside us. They are not simply *companion animals*, a term commonly used as a cipher for pets—rather, dogs and humans together are *companion species*. The human as it exists today is dog-inflected; the dog is human-inflected. Each one has come to be part of the constitution of the other.

So it is as well with other domestic animals. Ken Stone, for instance, has applied the concept of companion species to biblical studies in describing the animals in the stories about Jacob and Esau in Genesis. Without the goat skin to fool Isaac, for instance, Jacob could not have stolen his brother's blessing. A goat therefore has a profound effect

[1] An earlier version of this chapter was published as "The Pasture and the Battlefield: Domesticated Animals in the Song of Songs," in *Ask the Animals: Developing a Biblical Animal Hermeneutic*, ed. Arthur W. Walker-Jones and Suzanna R. Millar, Semeia Studies 104 (Atlanta: SBL, 2024), 195–204.

[2] Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 32.

on Jacob's future, and I've already mentioned Jacob's own breeding practices that certainly affect his flock's future. Stone comments, "Israel's narrative emergence is inextricably intertwined with domesticated animals."[3] In the Hebrew Bible's stories, the Israelite ancestors and their animals form companion species, each influencing and forming the other in their relations.

Having addressed the Song's wild herbivores in the previous chapter, in this chapter I examine the Song's domestic herbivores, which include in particular sheep and goats (often treated together) as well as horses. Humans share a companion species relationship with each one of these, as they co-constitutively influence one another. For their part, humans obviously play a great role in shaping the lives and bodies of sheep, goats, and horses. Selective breeding processes may produce a faster horse, a woolier sheep, or a more docile goat, any one of which simply would not have existed were it not for human intervention. But these domestic animals have worked their way into humanity as well. Sheep shape where humans may live as they provide wool, a warm covering to aid in settling in colder climates. Goats offer protein in the form of milk and meat, which focuses human modes of production more on animal rearing than on hunting and gathering. Horses provide transportation of people and goods across long distances, making humans more mobile as well as connecting them in trade and war.

For my purposes, however, the domestic animals of the Song show how they have nuzzled their way into our very ways of thinking, writing, and even loving. The Song would not be what it is without the sheep, goats, and horses that leave their footprints on

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[3] Ken Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 28.

its pages. In this chapter, I show how the domestic animals of the Song are companion species alongside humans, to the effect that the human poet has chosen to express love between humans in animal terms. The man's descriptions of the woman's body are inflected by the bodies of sheep and goats, and the woman may cast the man as a ram in portraying her longing for him. The man as well imagines his beloved as a horse, and in portraying his eros in equine terms, he shows her power over him. These connections between humans and their sheep, goats, and horses are not uncomplicated, as the domestic animals here are both dominated by and cared for by humans. As a result, their companion species relationship paves a path that winds around and through species hierarchies, and as the poet's metaphors come to apply to humans, we may see echoes of these hierarchies across gender lines as well. However, though these comparisons with domestic animals, we see that sexuality in the Song is an experience shared among humans and nonhumans alike. Just as animal breeding and reproduction is human-inflected, so also do the Song's ways of imagining human love come to be animal-inflected.

She(pherd) and (S)he(ep)

The first domestic animals the reader encounters, apart from the human lovers, are the flocks of sheep or goats treading across meadows and mountains in Song 1:7–8; 4:1–2; 6:5–6. Let's set the stage. The lovers, with their flocks in the pasture, are outside civilization, free to enjoy their love in an idyllic setting, one in which there is, as Jill Munro says, "harmony between human and beast."[4] F. Scott Spencer agrees: "Our

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[4] Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs*, Journal for the Study

couple's love longs for free, unfettered expression in harmony with nature's open environment."[5] Elaine James reminds us that shepherding is hard work in the "struggle for survival," so it's not all about spending a leisurely afternoon in the meadow,[6] but in the elevated and charged language of the Song, leisure time for extracurricular activities comes to the fore. The poetic imagination that sets the stage for this scene relies on a tradition of opposing nature against culture—the lovers are away from the city, away from society's expectations and strictures, in a setting that affords them the liberty to explore each other's bodies in a more natural way. Michael Goulder observes, "Pasturing is a common sexual image in the Song: the shepherd directing his sheep to the grass around a spring provided a ready suggestion of a similar activity between man and woman."[7] Like the pastoral scenes in Theocritus's *Idylls*, the Song is a "celebration of innocent pleasures in highly sophisticated art."[8] The pasture is a common setting for amorous encounters.

The appearance of this pastoral setting within love poetry already invites an erotic interpretation of these verses, which makes the interspecies character of the setting all the more interesting. Away from other humans and their judgments, shepherds may

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of the Old Testament Supplement Series 203 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 87.

[5] F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, Wisdom Commentary 25 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 22.

[6] Elaine T. James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs: Poetry and Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190619015.001.0001, 32.

[7] Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 36 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 13.

[8] Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Random House, 1995), 23–24.

encounter sexuality in raw and less inhibited forms. The nonhuman flocks they watch over do not exhibit the same scruples about privacy and decency that human cultures do, so a young shepherd's first encounter with sexuality may be in observing the intimate moments between the animals that they care for. Shepherding can be a learning experience for the sexually uninitiated and even an outlet for experimentation. Alfred Kinsey's famous sexuality studies in the 1940s found "something between 40 and 50 per cent of all farm boys who have some sort of animal contact, either with or without orgasm, in their pre-adolescent, adolescent, and or later histories"—a figure which he surmises is an undercount.[9] In his work on human-animal eroticism, Midas Dekkers concludes from Kinsey's data that "animals were simply a safety-valve until they were ready for a girl."[10] Particularly in societies where coitus is strictly limited to a marital context between human males and females, an unmonitored shepherd boy might test the boundaries and explore the sexual experiences afforded to him prior to gaining access to marriage. Dekkers notes, "The boys had the time, the means and the motive. They often slept in the stall with the animals or were alone with them in the fields for the whole day as shepherds."[11] In sum, the pasture is a place of labor, yes, but it is also characterized by opportunities for leisure, distance from society and its cultural norms, proximity to nonhuman animals uninhibited by those cultural norms, and a relative freedom for

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[9] Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardel B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948), 671. The girls and women in the corresponding study showed much lower incidence due to female sexuality being more tightly controlled (Alfred C. Kinsey, et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* [Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953], 503–5).

[10] Midas Dekkers, *Dearest Pet: On Bestiality*, trans. Paul Vincent (New York: Verso, 1994), 133.

[11] Dekkers, *Dearest Pet*, 133.

exploration.

Keeping these foregoing factors in mind, we approach the Song’s instances of pastoral imagery. Sheep and goats appear in 4:1–2, toward the beginning of a poem in which the man is describing the woman:

הִנָּ֨ךְ יָפָ֤ה רַעְיָתִי֙	Behold, you are beautiful, my darling.
הִנָּ֣ךְ יָפָ֔ה	Behold, you are beautiful.
עֵינַ֣יִךְ יוֹנִ֔ים מִבַּ֖עַד לְצַמָּתֵ֑ךְ	Your eyes are doves from behind your veil.
שַׂעְרֵךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הָֽעִזִּ֔ים	Your hair is like a flock of goats
שֶׁגָּלְשׁ֖וּ מֵהַ֥ר גִּלְעָֽד׃	That is flowing from the mountain of Gilead.
שִׁנַּ֙יִךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הַקְּצוּב֔וֹת	Your teeth are like a flock of shorn [ewes]
שֶׁעָל֖וּ מִן־הָֽרַחְצָ֑ה	That are coming up from washing,
שֶׁכֻּלָּם֙ מַתְאִימ֔וֹת	All of which bear twins,
וְשַׁכֻּלָ֖ה אֵ֥ין בָּהֶֽם׃	And none among them is bereaved of children.

These comparisons are repeated almost verbatim in another descriptive poem in 6:5–6. As mentioned in chapter 2 above, sheep and goats are typically treated collectively in the Song, their individual identities obscured by the general term “flock” or “herd” (עֵדֶר in 1:7; 4:1–2; 6:5–6; צאן in 1:8). This is certainly the case for Song 4:1–2 and its nearly identical reprise in 6:5–6, in which the man likens the woman’s hair to a flock of goats and her teeth to freshly washed sheep. Some scholars read the caprine comparison for the woman’s hair as a statement about its texture, with the multitude of goats pointing to the voluminous curls descending from the woman’s head.[12] This textural text brings to mind the image of the man running his hands through the coils of her locks, much as a goatherd might through the fur of his flocks. It is an image of interspecies intimacy, a portrait of petting in multiple senses—both amorous foreplay between humans and the pleasurable

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[12] Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs, Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), 154; Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 33.

touch between human and animal. But when the woman's teeth are said to be "like a flock of shorn [ewes]" (כְּעֵדֶר הַקְּצוּבוֹת, 4:2; cf. 6:6), the reader is reminded of one of the principal purposes behind the rearing of sheep and goats, i.e., their wool. The simile describes the woman's beauty in the eyes of the man, but the foundation of the simile lies in agricultural production. These are not wild sheep and goats that the poet's eyes just happened upon but rather domestic animals whose movements, diets, and bodies are controlled and nurtured by humans. In this image, care and consumption collide as we see the woman's features cast in nonhuman terms, as animals that require human support and protection in exchange for a regime of domination that values them as fur factories. As Song 4:2 (cf. 6:6) goes on to value the sheep bearing twins (מַתְאִימוֹת), we see this regime extending over the intimate details of reproductive capacity of sheep, the flock enriching the shepherd with more capital as it grows. The man compliments the woman with these caprine and ovine comparisons, and his expression of erotic interest in animal terms surely blurs the line between human and nonhuman, but the images simultaneously carry associations of species hierarchies.

These juxtapositions appear also in the sheep/goat imagery of Song 1:7–8:

הַגִּ֣ידָה לִּ֗י שֶׁאָֽהֲבָה֙ נַפְשִׁ֔י	Tell me, [you] whom my being loves,
אֵיכָ֣ה תִרְעֶ֔ה	Where do you graze?
אֵיכָ֖ה תַּרְבִּ֣יץ בַּֽצָּהֳרָ֑יִם	Where do you make [your sheep] lie down at noon?
שַׁלָּמָ֤ה אֶֽהְיֶה֙ כְּעֹ֣טְיָ֔ה	For why should I be like one who is veiled
עַ֖ל עֶדְרֵ֥י חֲבֵרֶֽיךָ:	Beside the flocks of your friends?
אִם־לֹ֤א תֵֽדְעִי֙ לָ֔ךְ	If you do not know for yourself,
הַיָּפָ֖ה בַּנָּשִׁ֑ים	[Most] beautiful among women,
צְאִי־לָ֞ךְ	Follow for yourself
בְּעִקְבֵ֣י הַצֹּ֗אן	In the footprints of the flock.
וּרְעִי֙ אֶת־גְּדִיֹּתַ֔יִךְ	And pasture your kids
עַ֖ל מִשְׁכְּנ֥וֹת הָרֹעִֽים:	Beside the tents of the shepherds.

In these verses, one or both of the lovers are figured as shepherds, one looking for the

other, a yearning search frequently attributed sexual meaning.[13] These two verses are universally held up as a related pair, so while they may or may not form a contiguous part of the preceding or succeeding lines of poetry, they are at the very least a single unit on their own, with v. 7 posing a question and v. 8 providing the corresponding answer. This passage is the first of multiple scenes in the Song that portray distance and searching, heightening the tension of unfulfilled erotic desire (cf. 3:1–5; 5:2–8). Here, the woman searches for the man and speaks directly to him, though he is absent, probing for his location. The lovers are separated, and she longs to be with "the one whom my being loves" (שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי). The woman's mode of inquiry to determine her beloved's location places the scene in a pastoral setting, as she asks about the man's grazing (more on this shortly), and the response in v. 8 continues in this vein.

The bucolic nature of these verses is not in doubt, but there is some debate around the identification of shepherd(s) and sheep here. Is the poet constructing a metaphor of one human shepherd longing for another? As discussed in chapter 2 above, this is certainly the most common reading. Scholars in the 1800s and much of the 1900s often found themselves preoccupied with nailing down the precise identity of the woman's beloved. Christian Ginsburg, for instance, confidently proclaims, "Nothing can be more plain and incontrovertible than the statement in this verse, that the damsel is a

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[13] So Paul Haupt, *The Book of Canticles: A New Rhythmical Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902), 53; Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth/Das Hohelied*, Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Neukirchener, 1965), 103; Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 7C (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 328–29; Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 103; Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 101; J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 106–8.

shepherdess, and the beloved a *shepherd*, whom, she is told, she would find among his fellow-shepherds."[14] For readers who take this view, there is a purity in the woman's rejection of the niceties of Solomon's royal court in favor of simple idyllic living. Others see the shepherd imagery as fully supporting the view that the beloved is indeed a king. Franz Delitzsch remarks, "She thinks of the shepherd of the people as the shepherd of sheep."[15] For him, there is no contradiction between the man as King Solomon and the man as shepherd, as the Song is the story of the lofty king discovering love in the simplicity of a country maiden. More recent scholarship, however, has been less interested in uncovering the secret of precisely who the man is, and readers are often more content to read these verses as evocative but vague, not necessarily pointing directly to any specific figure. Roland Murphy, as an example, has a more general reading in which "both the men and the woman appear as shepherds."[16] Similarly, Richard Hess unpacks the scene by describing the woman's desire to guide her own sheep to join with the man's: "She grazes her flocks alongside those of her lover's friends. However, she would prefer to join her flocks with his so that they could be together in the pastures."[17] For the majority of interpreters, then, *both the man and woman* appear as human shepherds guiding their sheep. Whether the shepherding imagery is literal or a metaphor

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[14] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 136, italics original.

[15] Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton, Clark's Foreign Theological Library 4/54 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 29; cf. Yehuda Feliks, *Song of Songs: Nature Epic and Allegory* (Jerusalem: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1983), 16–17.

[16] Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb936wk, 131.

[17] Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 60.

for royalty, the lovers are both caretakers over their flocks.

But this is not the only possible reading. The foregoing interpretations all read these verses as the *woman*, a shepherd, asking the *man*, also a shepherd, where he grazes his sheep. Most readers take this view, but it does require them to insert an object after the verbs “graze” (תִרְעֶה) and “make lie down” (תַּרְבִּיץ) in v.7. Graze what? Make who lie down? Translators will typically add something like “your sheep” or “your flock” as the object, treating it as if it is implied but not stated outright. Perhaps it is omitted for poetic reasons. Adding this object is of course not wrong, but it is also not necessary. What M. L. Case says about “graze” (רעה) in a similar metaphor in 2:16 applies just as well here: “the addition of an object is not necessary to understand this passage; the male lover could just as easily be the one grazing.”[18] If one takes this reading and chooses not to insert the object, then the woman’s question to the man is *not* one shepherd asking another, “Where do you [as a shepherd lead your flock to] graze?” Instead, it could be a *shepherd* (the woman) asking a *sheep* (the man), “Where do you [yourself, as a sheep] graze?”—this question of course being a sexual innuendo. The focus of the poem moves from the broad collective “flocks” to the individual animal as the human shepherd woman uses her erotic imagination to cast her lover as a nonhuman animal.

While this is not the dominant reading, some readers have acknowledged this possibility. James admits that this is one interpretive option: “The lover himself could be understood as the grazing animal.”[19] Tod Linafelt sees תִרְעֶה as a “double entendre,” with

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[18] M. L. Case, “Cunning Linguists: Oral Sex in the Song of Songs,” *Vetus Testamentum* 67 (2017): 171–86, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12341277, here 173.

[19] James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 36–37.

the meaning being "patently sexual" in either case.[20] For Elizabeth Huwiler, the woman's question in v. 7 is "halfway between asking the man where he grazes and rests, and asking him where he takes his flocks to graze and rest."[21] Cheryl Exum notes how most translations render the woman's inquiry virtuously: "Nearly all translations make the question straightforward and chaste by supplying the flock that the woman neglected to mention."[22] With the insertion of an object after the verbs "graze" and "make lie down," the reader is safely sequestered from any sensual interspecies potentialities. But it is Patrick Hunt who explores the implications of the man as sheep most fully. He suggests that the verb רבץ ("lie down, lie, rest," *CDCH*) puns on רבע-II, which can mean "lie down" or "rest" but also "copulate with," as in the bestiality prohibition in Leviticus 18:23. For Hunt, this paronomasia is all the more likely with "the lover possibly metaphorized as a flock animal," which makes the intended lovemaking between the shepherd-woman and the sheep-man into "an almost unnatural copulation."[23] Despite his reservations on the matter, Hunt more than anyone else recognizes the erotic possibilities of interspecies connection here. In this potential interpretation, the woman in her remote pastoral location is free of typical social inhibitions and searches for the ram she loves, in order to make love to him. In casting the lovers as shepherd and sheep, the poem shows

[20] Tod Linafelt, "Structure, Sound, and Sense: A Close Reading of Chapter One of the Song of Songs," in *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, ed. J. Blake Couey and Elaine T. James (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 123.

[21] Elizabeth Huwiler, "The Song of Songs," in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New International Biblical Commentary 12 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 252.

[22] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 107.

[23] Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, Studies in Biblical Literature 96 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 146.

how the experience of sexuality is not a sui generis human phenomenon but rather a common trait shared among various animals.

This reading has some interesting "ram"-ifications regarding domestication. Under this arrangement, if she is the shepherd and he the sheep, the woman is clearly in a position of authority over the man as she controls his movements, leads him to food, and protects him from predators, and of course, when we consider the amorous context of the Song, we might say she even intervenes in his breeding, recalling Jacob's breeding practices in Genesis 30 as well as the interventions of modern farmed animal husbandry practices. In this view, "domestication is fundamentally an unequal inter-species power relationship oriented toward humans and their needs."[24] Biblical texts frequently depict or assume a model of domestication as a "process of establishing and building into living beings (biologically and/or culturally) *ongoing* domination relations."[25] This hierarchical structure extends "first and foremost between humans and other animals, but also between various dominating subjects and dominated groups who are, not coincidentally, often animalized."[26] As a result, women and enslaved people also fall under the control of the dominating domesticator. If she is his shepherd, then, the text reverses this structure and makes her the domesticator, imagining the woman with an amount of power over the man that is uncharacteristic for an ancient patriarchal context. The traditional gender hierarchy of man over woman is upended in favor of the traditional species hierarchy of

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[24] David M. Carr, "The Bible and the Domestication of the World," *Biblical Interpretation* 31 (2023): 579–601, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-31050005, here 583.

[25] Carr, "The Bible and the Domestication of the World," 591.

[26] Carr, "The Bible and the Domestication of the World," 591, italics original.

shepherd over sheep.

While this view of domestication has merit, it is certainly not the only possible conception. We might also consider that if the woman is the shepherd, then he becomes "metaphorically a sheep in need of care."[27] She, as his caretaker, does not serve merely to dominate him but also to ensure his wellbeing. Kristin Armstrong Oma calls this a "duty of care," in that farmers "hold a self-imposed social obligation to the animals."[28] A shepherd must act in the interest of both herself and her animals: "the herder needs to develop a mutual relationship based upon trust with her flock."[29] Ensuring the health and comfort of her animals works to the benefit of them both. This care-oriented view of domestication aligns with Haraway's concept of companion species, as each partner in the relationship affects the other, human affecting sheep and sheep affecting human. In this way, nonhuman animals join humans as "active co-creators of the world."[30] Instead of a solely top-down, hierarchical relation between shepherd and sheep, "relations are managed by both farmers and animals, with their specific requirements to thrive and form a healthy flock, and by the animals' ability, by their agency, to choose whether to cooperate or resist."[31] Under a duty-of-care view rather than a domination view of

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[27] James, *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*, 37.

[28] Kristin Armstrong Oma, "Making Space from the Position of Duty of Care: Early Bronze Age Human-Sheep Entanglements in Norway," in *Multispecies Archaeology*, ed. Suzanne Pilaar Birch Routledge, 2018), 10.4324/9781315707709-14, 220.

[29] Kristin Armstrong Oma, "Between Trust and Domination: Social Contracts Between Humans and Animals," *World Archaeology* 42 (2010): 175–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/00438241003672724, here 184.

[30] Armstrong Oma, "Making Space from the Position of Duty of Care," 219, drawing on Haraway.

[31] Armstrong Oma, "Making Space from the Position of Duty of Care," 220.

domestication, perhaps the Song is thinking beyond traditional hierarchies of human over animal and male over female. In this imagined idyllic setting, she as shepherd cares for him as sheep, each one having agency, forming an intimate bond based on trust and mutual benefit.

This discussion of animal agency brings us to yet another interpretive possibility beyond the woman as shepherd and man as sheep. What if this dynamic were reversed, and the woman becomes the sheep and the man a shepherd? Goulder reads the woman's inquiry for the man's location in v. 7 as a desire to be one of his sheep, as she "first thinks of herself as a ewe lying down in the noon."[32] In this view, she is a sheep searching for her shepherd, that she may rest and relax in the midday sun under his watchful eye. Here, then, the hierarchies of gender and species align once again, as she yields power and relies on him for protection. However, Spencer also reads the woman as a sheep here, and he emphasizes her decision to search for the man:

> She is his "fairest" (1:8), most beautiful (יפה), most precious lamb or kid; she anticipates his laying her down at noon (1:7), his resting and eating with her in erotic refreshment. She is a willing, pursuant partner in this arrangement, seeking out his pastoral location where she may actively feed her needs.[33]

For Spencer, her search is an act of self-determination. She is not necessarily submitting to the man by seeking him and joining in his flock—in fact, her endeavor to secure her own needs demonstrates the power she wields over herself. Even as a sheep seeking a shepherd, she retains her agency. Thus, the contours of power do not map cleanly onto traditional hierarchies; for Spencer the domestic animal can choose for herself, and the

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[32] Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 13.

[33] Spencer, *Song of Songs*, 22.

woman can take charge of her own wellbeing. Nevertheless, in this arrangement as well, the "unnatural copulation" of human and nonhuman remains, as the poet still casts the search for a lover in multispecies terms. Across this complex terrain of gender and species, the lovers are two mammals sharing the experience of sexuality and aiming to do so together.

In still another possible reading, Benjamin Segal precludes a human/nonhuman encounter in this passage by connecting the grazing in 1:7 with the grazing of 2:16 (discussed with regard to the gazelle and deer imagery in chap. 3 above). He suggests that "she asks the lover, 'where do you pasture' not only as shepherd, but also as he who feeds among the lilies."[34] For Segal, her question casts the man as a grazing ungulate, as with some of the readings discussed above, but it changes *her* as well. He glosses the woman's question in 1:7 thus: "where do you pasture now (carrying out the image, to whom is your mouth drawn?) while you are away from me, your true lily (2:2)?"[35] The interspecies connection then is not the uncomfortable union of two different mammals but one of animal and plant—a culinary metaphor, with man as eater and woman as eaten. At first glance, Segal's reading can be read as reinforcing a conventional gendered power structure, with the man on top as the consumer and the woman as the consumed. The man as sheep seemingly holds sway over the woman as foodstuffs. Well, not so fast. Stone's observation about another food metaphor in 8:1–2 is equally true for 1:7–8: "While the woman may here be food for the man, it is she rather than he who initiates the

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[34] Benjamin J. Segal, *The Song of Songs: A Woman in Love* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2009), 107–8.

[35] Segal, *The Song of Songs*, 108.

meal."[36] The woman's question in 1:7, which sets up the pastoral metaphor in the first place, is an endeavor of her own making in order to search for her beloved. If the man's sheepish grazing does imply his mouth finding its way across her body, it is for her erotic pleasure, not her destruction. Jean-Jacques Lavoie calls language like this "tendresse cannibalique" ("cannibalistic tenderness") and "une faim érotique" ("an erotic hunger").[37] Perhaps the imagery is more masturbation than mastication. As a result, she is simultaneously a shepherd seeking her sheep as well as the meadow on which her sheep grazes—holding power and finding pleasure from giving it up.

In conclusion, across the contours of gender and species hierarchies, the poet uses animal imagery to express eroticism between human characters. This imagery is grounded in the subjugation of sheep and goats to the will of humans, who rear them for their products and control their lives. The intelligibility of these comparisons lies in the assumption of human domination over these animals. At the same time, however, humans and their domesticated animals are companion species, as Haraway would say, each affecting the other as they form they reality together. The trust and mutual care required in a shepherd/sheep relationship is reflected in the trust and care that the lovers of the Song show one another. We might ask of all the Song's pastoral imagery where the shepherd ends and the sheep begins or where the division is between goatherd and goat. In the context of this erotic poetry, the human/animal boundary is porous. What is

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[36] Ken Stone, "Pleasure and Danger in Biblical Interpretation: Food, Sex and Women in 2 Samuel 13 and the Song of Songs," in *Practicing Safer Texts: Food, Sex and Bible in Queer Perspective*, Queering Theology Series (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 103.

[37] Jean-Jacques Lavoie, "Festin érotique et tendresse cannibalique dans le Cantique de Cantiques," *Studies in Religion* 24 (1995): 131–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/000842989502400201, here 132 and 146 respectively.

admirable about sheep and goats becomes a compliment to humans, and it is precisely the caprine/ovine characteristics of one's lover that the poet praises. Human sexuality, then, is not sequestered into a separate realm of discourse but rather fully merged with the pastoral landscape as the relationship of companion species becomes the basis for depicting the companion lovers.

Horsing Around

Another metaphor of a domesticated animal, the horse, is applied to the woman in 1:9:

לְסֻסָתִי֙ בְּרִכְבֵ֣י פַרְעֹ֔ה	To a mare among the chariots of Pharaoh
דִּמִּיתִ֖יךְ רַעְיָתִֽי׃	I compare you, my lover.

This comparison has troubled many modern commentators, who often find it (as Duane Garrett describes it) "bewildering" and who strain to explain how calling one's lover a horse could possibly be complimentary.[38] However, sensuality is not alien to the worlds of horsemanship and chariotry. The prospect of an encounter with animal sexuality lurks in the background of many discussions about horses, as I show below.

For one, it is perhaps easy to remark on "the beauty of the horse" in general,[39] and this equine comparison is not unique to the Song, as many scholars show by citing Theocritus:

> πιείρᾳ μεγάλα ἅτ᾽ ἀνέδραμε κόσμος ἀρούρᾳ
> ἢ κάπῳ κυπάρισσος, ἢ ἅρματι Θεσσαλὸς ἵππος,
> ὧδε καὶ ἁ ῥοδόχρως Ἑλένα Λακεδαίμονι κόσμος·
>
> As a tall cypress rises high to adorn some fertile field or garden,
> or as a Thracian horse adorns its chariot,

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[38] Duane A. Garrett, "The Song of Songs," in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 144.

[39] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 33.

> just so is rosy Helen the ornament of Sparta.
> (Theocritus, *Idylls* 18.29–31, Hopkinson [LCL])

Ginsburg, in his commentary on 1:9, quotes English Assyriologist Austen Henry Layard's observations on the beauty of a horse:

> A young chestnut mare, belonging to the sheik, was one of the most beautiful creatures I ever beheld. As she struggled to free herself from the spear to which she was tied, she showed the lightness and elegance of the gazelle. Her limbs were in perfect symmetry; her ears long, slender, an transparent; her nostrils high, dilated and deep red, her neck gracefully arched; and her mane and texture of silk. […] No one can look at the horses of the early Assyrian sculptures without being convinced that they were drawn from the finest models.[40]

Delitzsch calls the traditional writer of the Song, Solomon, a "Philip, i.e. a man fond of horses" and "a keen hippologue" who "had an open eye for the beauty of the horse," so he would recognize a beautiful mare for all her worth.[41] Helen may be a horse to Sparta's chariot, Layard may marvel at a "beautiful creature," and Delitzsch's Solomon may be a Φίλιππος, but "bewildered" Song scholars are generally correct that identifying particular traits in one's female lover as equine does not usually invite a positive response for today's readers. As a result, a number of scholars have suggested that the poet's goal for this metaphor is not to provide a representation of her physical characteristics but rather to make a more conceptual connection.

Furthermore, a detail from Qumran raised up by Marvin Pope adds to the subtle associations of horses and sensuality. As discussed in detail in chapter 2 above, Pope, in a journal article and later in his Song of Songs commentary,[42] is often credited with

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[40] Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1849), 1:90–91; qtd. in Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 136–37.

[41] Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 33.

[42] Marvin H. Pope, "A Mare in Pharaoh's Chariotry," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental*

resurrecting for modern scholarship one interpretation for this conceptual association, first seen in earlier rabbinic texts,[43] that positions this horse metaphor within the thought-world of the military. Horses in biblical texts are often associated with "military use,"[44] so perhaps biblical love poetry is drawing on these same sorts of connotations. How then does this mare fit into this bellicose imagery? Pope argues that it is not mares but *stallions* that were used in the Egyptian military to pull chariots, a claim he backs up by mentioning depictions of stallions in visual arts as well as by citing the Qumran War Scroll, which requires stallions (סוסים זכרים) in the cavalry (1QM VI, 12).[45] He then raises the possibility that the prohibition against mares in warfare among the Qumran community "may have been motivated by a concern to avoid bestiality,"[46] which, even if he does not hold firm to the accuracy of this possibility, is a fascinating suggestion on multiple counts.

First, Pope's heteronormative imagination cannot conceive the possibility of sexual interaction between a male warrior and his male steed. Why the use of a male horse would be a preventative measure is not explained—he simply takes up the heterosexist assumption that even if a human *might* have sex with a horse, it could not

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Research 200 (1970): 56–61, https://doi.org/10.2307/1356179; *Song of Songs*, 338–40.

[43] See Song of Songs Rabbah 1.9.2.2A–C; Avot of Rabbi Nathan 27; Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 42.

[44] James A. Rimbach, "Animal Imagery in the Old Testament" (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1972), 146–48; see Exod 15:1, 21; Isa 2:7; 31:1; Ezek 38:4, 14; Jer 6:23; 50:42; 46:9; Job 39:18–25; Amos 4:10; Nahum 3:2; Zech 10:3; Ps 20:8; Prov 21:31; 39:20.

[45] See Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader, part 1: Texts Concerned with Religious Law* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 220–21.

[46] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 340. On this, Pope cites commentary from Yigael Yadin, *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 182.

possibly be *gay* sex with a horse. The Hebrew Bible nowhere expresses this concern for the biological or anatomical sex of the nonhuman animal in its bestiality prohibitions. Leviticus 20:15–16 does specify that both אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה are forbidden from partaking in cross-species extracurricular activity (cf. Lev 18:23)—probably because the default addressee of a law is primarily the male subject, so it's helpful to specify a female addressee this instance—but this refers to the human partner only, not to the nonhuman animal. Intercourse with a nonhuman animal seems to be forbidden outright in the Hebrew Bible, irrespective of the participants' genital arrangement (see also Exod 22:18; Deut 27:21). This speculation about the Qumran community's reasoning for excluding mares is not grounded in any evidence apart from straight assumptions.

However, and more importantly for my purposes, the second feature of Pope's comment here that interests me is that he is already thinking of horses sexually. That is, even if the specific case of a man/stallion rendezvous is inconceivable, the broader possibility of human/horse sex certainly is not. Qumran warriors, he suggests, could have been tempted to partake if their mounts were female; this scenario is entirely fathomable, and in Pope's mind, may have necessitated policing to avoid. Significantly, though unmentioned by Pope, Hittite Laws §§187–188 and §199 prohibit various forms of bestiality, but §200A explicitly *permits* sex between a man and a horse or mule (*ANET*, 196–197). The Hittite Laws in every case call bestiality *ḫurkel* ("do[ing] evil with" in Goetz's *ANET* translation; cf. Hoffner's "forbidden sexual combination, incest"[47]), but

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[47] Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., "Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East," in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1973), 84.

while death or banishment is the appropriate response for fucking other nonhuman animals, the laws explicitly state that "there is no punishment" for sex with a horse (§200A). This exception for equids is accounted for in a few ways. Perhaps it is due to "varying degrees of kinship with the different animal species," so that the animals with whom the Hittites felt the most kinship would be permitted for sexual intercourse;[48] or perhaps due to Hittite soldiers' or traders' long stints on the road, which interrupted their sex lives: "Since opportunities for normal sexual relations were impossible on such trips it might have been considered permissible to engage in sexual relations with the horse and mule."[49] Under this latter explanation, Roland Boer remarks, "the horse would have become like a wife on the road,"[50] a note that perhaps betrays an accidental heteronormative imagination akin to Pope's—the Qumran horses may have been male to *prevent* sex, but Boer pictures the Hittite horses as female (a substitute "wife") precisely because sex is *permitted*. In either case, though, for these commentators on Qumran and Hatti alike, the point stands that horses can invite sexual interpretations. A discussion about horses opens the door to a discussion of their sexuality, and perhaps nowhere is this more important than in love poetry.

Song 1:9 is the only explicit mention of horses in the song, but Goulder sees the comingling of sexiness and equines at play in 6:12 as well. In this verse, the woman

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[48] Cyrus H. Gordon and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Norton, 1997), 265 n. 13.

[49] James C. Moyer, "Hittite and Israelite Cultic Practices: A Selected Comparison," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. William W. Hallo (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 26 n. 25.

[50] Roland Boer, *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity, and Carnality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 137.

imagines herself מַרְכְּבוֹת עַמִּי־נָדִיב ("in a chariot beside my prince," NRSVue; cf. "Mid the chariots of Ammi-nadib," NJPS). As we can see, translations differ on exactly how these chariots are qualified, but what is clear is whereas in 1:9 the chariot imagery was applied to her by way of the man, here in 6:12 the woman uses this imagery herself. On this verse, Goulder notes that "she is still the mare, but he is now the 'charioteer'."[51] While Pope's reading casts the man as a chariot-pulling stallion drawn astray by the woman as mare, here Goulder's observation places the man in the driver's seat. Significantly, as a charioteer, he is now human rather than horse. This sensual image already recalls the sexual possibilities that come up when horse and soldier appear together, but if the sensuality of the scene weren't immediately clear, Goulder goes on: "The Hebrews had thus already discovered that sexual union could take place in more than one position."[52] For Goulder, the man is topping the woman from behind. Modern U.S. readers, living in more urban society as well as one where canine ownership is common, might more naturally describe the sex position depicted here as doggy-style, but Goulder imagines the Hebrew poet drawing on scenes from her own context. Jens Rydström's study of Swedish bestiality law and practice describes a similar scene in pre-industrial Sweden: "Sitting in the driver's seat, staring at the horse's behind, perhaps excited by the vibrations of the cart, some drivers were overwhelmed by the situation, stopped the cart, mounted the shafts, and penetrated the animal."[53] In Goulder's reading of Song 6:12, the woman

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[51] Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 51.

[52] Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, 51.

[53] Jens Rydström, *Sinners and Citizens: Bestiality and Homosexuality in Sweden, 1880–1950*, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 61.

positions herself as a horse, with her human soldier seducing her from behind. In the case of the horse, as all these examples illustrate, the discourses of sex and war overlap: the presence of a horse in the context of human warfare is a site of potential sexual activity.

This brings us back to the Song's mare in 1:9, which Pope argues must be a defensive strategy to confront the stallions pulling Egyptian chariots.[54] The strategic purpose of this mare, then, is to distract those stallions with her pheromones and thus to trip up the opposing army's chariots. Pope grounds this reading in an Egyptian account in which a soldier kills this distracting mare, "thus preventing a debacle before the excited stallions could take out after the mare."[55] The meaning of the Song's horse metaphor, then, would be that in the same way that a mare in heat may distract horny stallions, so also the woman in the Song distracts the man with her attractiveness.[56]

For the man, Pope says, this mention of a menstrual mare means the woman is "the ultimate in sex appeal."[57] Her presence draws his attention away from his duties and to his desire. He becomes what the prophet Jeremiah accuses his audience of acting like—"horny, testicled stallions" (סוּסִים מְיֻזָּנִים מַשְׁכִּים, Jer 5:8, my translation)—which Jeremiah certainly does not intend as a compliment,[58] but which illustrates the point well.

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[54] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 338–39.

[55] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 338.

[56] Longman, *Song of Songs*, 103; André LaCocque, *Romance She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 78; Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 57–58.

[57] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 341.

[58] Heather A. McKay, "Through the Eyes of Horses: Representation of the Horse Family in the Hebrew Bible," in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 348 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 127–41, here 137.

He, like a horse or any number of other creatures, finds himself motivated by hormones and passions. As Maria Metzler writes, the woman "reminds every stallion that he is an animal."[59] The man in his most sober moments may think himself above the rest of the animal kingdom, but the woman intoxicates him and reveals that he also is an animal. He is not separate and above—he is merely one of many, one mammal among others experiencing sexual desire.

In Pope's understanding of the horse metaphor, the woman has the potential to stop whole armies in their tracks, which obviously affects the man, but this metaphor has profound implications for the woman as well. Figured as a horse, the woman, Carol Meyers explains, "does violence to the military effectiveness of the charioteers."[60] While the Hebrew Bible is no stranger to women in military positions (e.g., Deborah in Judg 4–5), it is certainly not the most common role that women in these texts fulfill. The woman here, then, is understood as a powerful force on the battlefield. And what's more, within this metaphor, the stallions (and with them, the man of the Song) are stripped of self-control as they are driven by hormones alone. Metzler describes the scene with evocative language:

> Their veined nostrils are flaring and quivering with screams of passion, their stringent discipline has been shattered, snapped like a fence against a freight train. […] And so a single female horse deconstructs the fearsome order of Pharaoh's many stallions. One horse deconstructs another. But if the military discipline of

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[59] Francis Landy and Maria Metzler, "Deconstructing Horses, in Love and War," in *The Song of Songs Afresh: Perspectives on a Biblical Love Poem*, ed. Stefan Fischer and Gavin Fernandes, Hebrew Bible Monographs 82 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2019), 157.

[60] Carol Meyers, "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 209–23, here 217.

the stallions is fearsome, so is the chaos stirred up by their visceral desire.[61] In contrast to the common Western tendency to portray men as guided by reason and the mind, in contrast to women as guided emotion and their bodies, it is the *males* here who are positively overtaken by hormonal craving.[62] As a result of this horse imagery, the woman, whose presence overwhelms and overpowers her beloved, is depicted in a way that according to Meyers runs "counter to stereotypical gender conceptions."[63] In this sense, the woman wins out over the man.

This victory, however, comes at a cost, as this metaphor is quite precarious for the mare. While the shepherding imagery places the characters in a serene pasture, if Pope's insight on Egyptian military customs is correct, then the horse metaphor imagines the lovers on a battlefield. The man and woman who serve as the referent of this metaphor don't appear to endanger one another in 1:9, but the vehicle, the mare who serves as a distraction for an opposing army's horny stallions, is risking her life. The chaos she causes also endangers her:

> Instead of directing their aggression towards the enemy, each [stallion] chases that female wildly, crashing into other muscled males and drawing blood with the sharpness of their teeth and hooves. It is a scene of violence. In their passionate rampage, the stallions threaten to tear each other apart, and my mare might also get hurt in the mayhem.[64]

Apart from the peril presented by other horny horses, human warriors pose a threat. In fact, in the Egyptian source on which Pope bases his reading of this verse, the offending

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[61] Landy and Metzler, "Deconstructing Horses, in Love and War," 157–58.

[62] The man being overwhelmed by the woman is a theme the Song will return to in 6:5.

[63] Meyers, "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs," 217.

[64] Landy and Metzler, "Deconstructing Horses, in Love and War," 158.

mare is killed by a soldier.[65] This symbol of love for the human couple of the Song spells death for the mare in Pope's reading. While it might be true that this metaphor figures the woman as strong and overpowering vis-à-vis the man, Yvonne Thöne points out that the mare isn't simply interfering with human warfare of her own accord—she is dominated and directed by soldiers that care for battle tactics more than her own wellbeing.[66] The Song's woman drives the man mad, but the metaphor's warriors drive the mare into danger. McKay acknowledges that the equine metaphor in 1:9 is intended as a compliment, but comparisons like these, "while not necessarily pejorative of animals, are, however, open to question."[67] Set in a scene of warfare, this compliment for the woman bears deadly undertones: "Such tactical destruction of other people's horses implies ruthless treatment of the animals in question."[68] This metaphor, like the sheep/goat metaphor before it, is founded at least in part on the subjection of nonhuman animals to human purposes.

Furthermore—again, if Pope's reading is correct—one may wonder whether the depiction of the woman by means of the hormonal extremes of horse sexuality is all that liberative. I noted above that for Meyers this imagery runs "counter to stereotypical gender conceptions," and as we saw, it certainly gives the lie to the association of masculinity with dispassionate rationality, but the woman is also driven by passions here.

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[65] Pope, *Song of Songs*, 338.

[66] Yvonne Sophie Thöne, "Female Humanimality: Animal Imagery in the Song of Songs and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography," *Journal for Semitics* 25 (2017): 389–408, https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/2546, here 397.

[67] McKay, "Through the Eyes of Horses," 133–34.

[68] McKay, "Through the Eyes of Horses," 134.

Elsewhere, Jeremiah once again compares his audience to “a restless she-camel” (בִּכְרָה קַלָּה) and an onager “panting for the wind in her heat” (שָׁאֲפָה רוּחַ תַּאֲנָתָהּ, Jer 2:23–24). Once she has been overtaken by her desires, she is gone. The prophet asks exasperatedly, “Who can get her back?” (מִי יְשִׁיבֶנָּה, Jer 2:24). We see then a second instance of Jeremiah using unrestrained animal sexuality in a pejorative comparison. If we carry this logic back to the Song, we might say that the women’s portrayal as an estrous mare is not opposed to “stereotypical gender conceptions” but rather fully in line with those same stereotypes. The woman would then be confirming the patriarchal expectations that see her as guided by body rather than mind.

Possibilities thus exist for reading the mare as playing a powerful role in this metaphor, but this power is caught up in a network of species and gender implications. She may metaphorically be disruptive to military capabilities and so overwhelm the man’s desire, but the mare’s subservience to the needs of male soldiers—so much so as to endanger her—is disturbingly close to patriarchal norms that position women below men even as this makes life precarious for women. Accordingly, Vita Daphna Arbel comments that “this representation of the horse-like *most beautiful woman* subtly positions her as a submissive asset lacking agency, whose docile, decorated body is publicly displayed and showcased.”[69] She is used and seen, controlled and observed. As a mare, then, the woman holds sway over the man as she enraptures him, but the Song is not an inherently feminist text, and these hierarchies across lines of species and gender

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[69] Vita Daphna Arbel, *On Femininities in the Song of Songs and Beyond: The Most Beautiful Woman*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 716 (London: T&T Clark, 2022), https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567700087, 111, italics original.

may still apply.

In all of this, the horse stands at the nexus of war, sexuality, gender, and species. To invoke the horse in a context of battle is to invite a discourse where sexuality already lurks in the background, from ancient Hatti to modern scholars like Pope. What's more, to invoke "a mare among the chariots of Pharaoh" highlights the coincidence of these sexual and animal connotations more specifically. The man blurs his human identity with that of a stallion, using equine imagery as the means to convey his desire. In so doing, the woman becomes a mare—one horse among a whole army of horses that live under human control, but at the same time one horse whose influence is so profound as to throw a multitude of chariot-pulling stallions off course. As humans depict their own sexuality in equine terms, we see that the horse, then, is not so different from the human—subject to forces of external power and internal drives. The Song is fully aware that humans and horses alike experience pleasure and lust.

Conclusion

The Song of Songs would be a much less colorful series of poems without its domestic animals, and clearly these animals have shaped the thoughts of the poet and the world this poet inhabits. Nonhuman animals provide these lovers a rich vocabulary of imagery in describing each other's bodies and desires. Without humans, these domestic animals would not exist, but by the same measure, without sheep, goats, and horses, the Song of Songs simply would not exist. In this way, humans and the nonhumans with whom they share their land and their lives are companion species.

The nature of this companionship is not a relationship of equality. As we've seen, the metaphors and similes of the Song often use these creatures in ways that emphasize

their use for human purposes rather than any intrinsic value they might have on their own.[70] Wool and milk are what humans value in their relationship with sheep and goats, and transportation and military strategy are the primary factors of the equine metaphor. The reader is never privy to the perspectives of the Song's beasts—instead, domestic animals appear as beings that serve human functions. These comparisons depend upon the ownership and subjugation of domestic animals. At the same time, though, this domestication relationship requires, as Armstrong Oma argues, a duty of care for humans on behalf of their nonhuman animals. Wool and milk do not simply appear out of the ether but rather require the cultivation and care of these animals to ensure their wellbeing and productivity.

What's more, as companion species with these domesticated animals, humans do not leave this encounter unmarked. As the lovers express their erotic feelings in nonhuman terms, the domestic animal imagery of the Song makes the lines between human and animal a bit fuzzy. It is the caprine, ovine, and equine aspects of the lovers that they admire in one another, and in these descriptions, their human qualities blend with animal ones. As Yvonne Thöne says, "The Song's animal imagery has the effect of animalising the human as well as humanising the animal."[71] And if domestic animals can

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[70] I disagree, as a result, with Carey Walsh's comment in "The Wisdom of Animals in the Song of Songs," in *The Song of Songs in Its Context: Words for Love, Love for Words*, ed. Pierre Van Hecke, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 310 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1q26kv6.32, 597: "Creatures exist without need of human interference. Domestication is unnecessary, even unthinkable for the Song." Her analysis shows that the common ground for comparison between humans and nonhumans should lead the reader to meditate on ethical considerations of nonhuman life, which is commendable, but the argument goes too far and ignores the complexities of domestication for some of the Song's animals.

[71] Thöne, "Female Humanimality," 392. See also Hendrik Viviers, "Eco-Delight in the Song of Songs," in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, The Earth Bible 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 149, who sees "[h]umans 'becoming' Nature and Nature

be used to give voice to the human lovers in their experience of sexual love, these blurry lines between human and animal may cause one to wonder whether the love and care showed to a lover means that domestic animals may be due the same ethical attention.

'becoming' human."

CHAPTER 5: SEX AND DANGER: PREDATORS IN THE SONG

Introduction

Predatory mammals appear briefly in two verses in the Song of Songs, both of which present interpretive challenges for scholars trying to understand their relation to their surrounding context as well as their metaphorical meaning, assuming such a meaning exists. But if any agreement can be reached on the significance of these predators, it is that they pose a danger to one of the lovers or to their relationship as a whole.

Foxes appear in Song 2:15 amid a succession of herbivorous nature images as pests who ruin vineyards:

אֱחֱזוּ־לָ֙נוּ֙ שׁוּעָלִ֔ים	Catch for us foxes,
שׁוּעָלִ֖ים קְטַנִּ֑ים	Little foxes
מְחַבְּלִ֣ים כְּרָמִ֔ים	That ruin vineyards.
וּכְרָמֵ֖ינוּ סְמָדַֽר׃	Our vineyards are in bloom.

As discussed in chapter 2, the nature of the danger here is debatable. Perhaps the foxes represent a dire threat to the integrity of the couple’s relationship, or perhaps because they are “little” (קְטַנִּ֑ים), they are merely mischievous nuisances. Whatever the threat level, the unidentified speaker commands their capture.

The common reading of the big cats of Song 4:8 is also as representations of danger, primarily for the woman located among them:

אִתִּ֤י מִלְּבָנוֹן֙ כַּלָּ֔ה	With me from Lebanon, bride,
אִתִּ֥י מִלְּבָנ֖וֹן תָּב֑וֹאִי	With me from Lebanon you will come.
תָּשׁ֣וּרִי ׀ מֵרֹ֣אשׁ אֲמָנָ֗ה	You will travel from the peak of Amana,
מֵרֹ֤אשׁ שְׂנִיר֙ וְחֶרְמ֔וֹן	From the peak of Senir and Hermon,
מִמְּעֹנ֣וֹת אֲרָי֔וֹת	From the dens of lionesses,
מֵֽהַרְרֵ֖י נְמֵרִֽים׃	From the mountains of leopards.

Her environment among these animals is “hostile,”[1] “ominous,”[2] and “dangerous.”[3] The solution here is not the cats’ capture but her own evacuation. In this view, joining her beloved represents a double respite, not merely an end to their separation but also an escape from peril. This verse, spoken by the man, makes a persuasive case: reject your current dangerous situation and embrace a better situation with me.

In both cases, there is something of an implied risk as well as a means of circumventing or confronting that risk. The poet does not take time to explore the nature of these dangers or place particular emphasis on them, merely mentioning them in passing and then continuing with amorous language. As Renita Weems puts it with regard to Song 2:15, “the protagonist is not emphasizing danger, but seduction.”[4] What this chapter aims to discuss, however, is the potential space where danger and seduction may overlap. Is the woman just a damsel in distress in these two verses? What other meanings might this danger convey? This chapter examines readings of the Song that explore this territory where domination and sexuality meet.

I begin with Val Plumwood’s encounter with a crocodile that nearly killed her, an experience upon which she offered some insightful philosophical meditations. Her thoughts emphasize a continuity between human and nonhuman animals because of our shared vulnerability, which coheres well with my overarching argument that the Song

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[1] Andrew Harper, *The Song of Solomon with Introduction and Notes*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 29.

[2] Weems, “The Song of Songs,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 403.

[3] Leroy Waterman, *The Song of Songs: Translated and Interpreted as a Dramatic Poem* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1948), 77.

[4] Weems, “The Song of Songs,” 394.

blurs the lines between species. However, if relying on this vulnerability argument is to zig, then we will zag by taking up Plumwood's brief mention of some sexual implications of her encounter. A discussion of Plumwood's allusion to a potentially predatory pornographic film segues into a discussion of sex and domination in the Song as we examine how a number of commentators have read the seductive potential of the Song's predatory animals. As with the porn, so with the Song—domination and danger can be sexy.

Plumwood, Predators, Peril, and Porn

Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood writes of her 1985 encounter with the danger of a wild predator in the swamp of Kakadu National Park. There she "experienced the unfamiliar sensation of being watched," and before long she found herself looking into the "beautiful, flecked golden eyes" of a saltwater crocodile.[5] (We might recall here also Jacques Derrida's view into animal eyes leading him to interrogate his subjectivity discussed in chap. 3.) The crocodile attacked her, grabbed her in its jaws, and proceeded to do multiple death rolls. In spite of the odds, however, she survived, and this near-death encounter became a focal point that she returned to in her writing and philosophy.

Plumwood frames her attack as a series of competing narratives. Her reflections about the scene describe how she saw the world in that moment "from the outside," decentering her privileged human subjectivity.[6] She had told herself a story of who she

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[5] Val Plumwood, "Being Prey," in *The Ultimate Journey: Inspiring Stories of Living and Dying*, ed. James O'Reilly, Sean O'Reilly, and Richard Sterling (San Francisco: Travelers' Tales, 2000), 128-46, here 129 and 131, respectively.

[6] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 132.

was as a human in the world, but this view "from the outside" shattered and resignified that tidy narrative: "the narrative self is threatened with invasion and loss of integrity when the story of the self is taken over by others and given an alien meaning."[7] The crocodile was not concerned with her self-image and so revealed that image to be illusory. In the moment of the attack, she had thought, "*I'm a human being, not meat*," but she had to confront "the brute fact of being prey."[8] Elsewhere, Plumwood observes, "The eye of the crocodile showed me that there really is a world in which we are all food."[9] This very literal encounter with the jaws of death showed her that humans are merely one among many other animal species, not something separate and above nonhumans. Indeed, "humans are part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater."[10] Matthew Calarco summarizes thus: "Plumwood entered into a zone of indistinction where the differences traditionally posited between human and animal dropped out."[11] Though for the crocodile she was simply a missed chance at a meal, Plumwood rewrote her own self-narrative in this humbling and revealing experience.

Already, we may see correspondences between Plumwood's conclusions about her place in the world and this dissertation's argument that the Song blurs the lines between the human and the nonhuman. As an example, the lionesses and leopards of 4:8

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[7] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 140.

[8] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 143, italics original.

[9] Val Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, ed. Lorraine Shannon (Canberra, Australia: ANU E Press, 2012), 36.

[10] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 145.

[11] Matthew Calarco, *Thinking through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 60.

scare some commentators just as the specter of Plumwood's crocodile might. Luis Stadelman highlights the danger of the scene by describing the mountains as "infested" with predators, and likewise, Dianne Bergant calls the area "a forested range infested with lions and leopards."[12] But these regions are not *infested*, as if invaded by some external pest—this is the cats' own home! Plumwood recalls how she attempted to keep her story to herself and her friends so as to preempt a terrible overreaction: "Crocodile attacks in North Queensland have often led to massive crocodile slaughters, and I feared that my experience might have put the creatures at risk again."[13] She was in the crocodiles' home, and they have as much right to live there as humans do in their own homes. For Plumwood, all animals are vulnerable, susceptible to becoming food or to being hunted. She found a commonality with nonhuman animals in this vulnerability—all animals need food, care, and a home, and humans are no different from any other animal in this way. The lines separating human and nonhuman thus become fuzzy, and the remaining challenge is to figure out how one might "coexist with the otherness of the earth."[14] Perhaps the lesson of the big cats of Song 4:8 is this very coexistence, a lesson to view the nonhuman world as neighbor rather than infestation. The human woman and her feline counterparts are not so different from one another. The verse mentions no enmity between them, which leads biblical scholars like Hendrik Viviers to suggest that

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[12] Luis Stadelman, *Love and Politics: A New Commentary on the Song of Songs* (New York: Paulist, 1992), 118; Dianne Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 50.

[13] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 139.

[14] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 145.

she is “at ease and at home here in the wild as if the wild animals are her family.”[15]

Similarly, Carey Walsh says of the foxes in Song 2:15,

> The Song presents a peaceful coexistence between humans and other creatures. There is no strife or domination. In fact, the only hint of interspecies tension is when the woman wishes to stop foxes from stealing grapes from the vineyard (2,15). And even *that* goes uncorrected, as both the lovers and foxes enjoy vineyards.[16]

In this perspective, these foxes don’t actually present a conflict for the couple. In fact, the poem doesn’t actually describe what takes place after the imperative “Catch for us foxes,” so maybe the foxes and the couple do indeed both enjoy the grape blossoms undisturbed. When humans can find connection with nonhuman animals, perhaps a peaceable coexistence is possible.

But let’s go deeper, as Plumwood’s retrospective was not the only one of the competing narratives she describes. After the attack, other narrators retold the tale in their own way. The media played up the story with sensationalist headlines; the park service downplayed the story as an act of self-defense from a threatened animal; sexist bigots told themselves the events of the story confirmed their preconceived notions about how women do not belong in nature (despite Plumwood’s knowledge and experience being key to her survival, which would seem to suggest that women are perfectly capable of navigating the wild).

For my purposes, however, the most pertinent angle of storytelling is a

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[15] Hendrik Viviers, “Eco-Delight in the Song of Songs,” in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst, The Earth Bible 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 147.

[16] Carey Walsh, “The Wisdom of Animals in the Song of Songs,” in *The Song of Songs in Its Context: Words for Love, Love for Words*, ed. Pierre Van Hecke, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 310 (Leuven: Peeters, 2020), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1q26kv6.32, 595–96.

sexualizing narrative that arose after the attack according to Plumwood: "The events seemed to provide irresistible material for the pornographic imagination, which encouraged male identification with the crocodile and interpretation of the attack as sadistic rape."[17] As evidence of this trend, she points disapprovingly to a 1986 pornographic film: "The reinterpretation of the experience in these sexual terms and its portrayal in porno films like *Crocodile Blondee* reveal the extent to which sadism is normalized in dominant culture as masculinist sexuality."[18] For her, this film casts the male as a dominating predator, making it a scene of violent coercion rather than equitable lovemaking. Plumwood does not examine the film in question in any detail—in fact, this is all she says about it—and to be fair, if I suspected that someone had made an opportunistic movie about a traumatic event that I endured, I may not give it the time of day either. However, in reality the film serves as a poor representation of Plumwood's point about masculinist sadism because it isn't about that at all! This is not to say that Plumwood's point about predation and masculinity would not be applicable in other cases—for instance, Carol Adams's landmark book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* describes in detail the many ways that women are associated with meat as objects of male consumption, and we saw Derrida critiquing the masculine domination of women and animals under the phrase "carnivorous virility" in chapter 3.[19] But the film Plumwood mentions is simply not about a predatory masculine libido.

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[17] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 140.

[18] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 140.

[19] Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990); Derrida, "'Eating Well'," 280.

Crocodile Blondee (1986), directed by Stephen Lucas and Ronnie Racer and written by John Fredricks, is not about the Australian wild (or Australia at all, geographically or even aesthetically) nor about crocodiles or any other animal attack. There is no sense in which this is a "portrayal," as Plumwood says, of her near-death experience, and the film does not depict a sadistic male fantasy of predatory rape. In fact, the *Dundee*-inspired title so loosely connects to the content of the film that the filmmakers include a voiceover at the end to explain this flimsy association: "You're probably wondering why we called this picture *Crocodile Blondee*. You know why? Because she bites." Indeed, it is the woman protagonist Rita who is the predator in this story—*she* is the one who bites. Throughout the narrative (inasmuch as there is one), Rita is shown to be seductive and sex-obsessed, constantly looking to lie with the men and women she meets. So voracious is her sexual appetite that even her sex therapist is not immune to her advances. Rather than a fantasy about masculine domination, *Crocodile Blondee* is precisely the inverse of what Plumwood claims. This is of course not to say that it is not still male fantasy—the intended audience is presumably straight men, but the fantasy is in being pursued rather than in being the pursuer. There is no rape or crocodiles, only a woman who "bites." This coincidence of sexuality and domination takes us back to the Song of Songs and its predators.

Sex and Domination in the Song

Questions of sex and domination are not new for scholarship on the Song of Songs. The relative prominence this book gives to a woman and her point of view led some early feminist scholars to take an overly rose-tinted view of the poem. Phyllis Trible, for instance, proclaims, "In this setting, there is no male dominance, no female

subordination, and no stereotyping of either sex."[20] Alicia Ostriker argues that the Song "includes no representation of hierarchy or rule, no relationship of dominance and submission, and (almost) no violence."[21] Weems would agree: "The Song of Songs advocates balance in female and male relationships, urging mutuality not domination."[22] Remarks like these tend to gloss over difficulties in the text and thus lead Cheryl Exum to suggest that the Song "can be hazardous to your critical faculties" and can make a "bubbling romantic" of an otherwise discerning scholar.[23]

Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore respond to these readings in depth in their own analysis of Song scholars' implicit concepts of "good sex" and "bad sex."[24] In their view, critics celebrate or condemn the Song on the basis of assumptions about sexual propriety—namely, an egalitarian (but still heteronormative) good ideal vs. a dominating, exploitative, and pornographic bad exemplar. That is, for some, the Song of Songs is good because it avoids unequal gender relations, and for others, it is bad precisely because it does *not* avoid them. Both of these readings, though, rely on ideas about good

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[20] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 161.

[21] Alicia Ostriker, "A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Countertext," in *The Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, The Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 43.

[22] Renita J. Weems, "Song of Songs," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 168.

[23] J. Cheryl Exum, "Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know about the Song of Songs," in *The Song of Songs*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine, The Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series) 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 25, italics removed.

[24] Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore, "Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003): 24–52, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685150360495561, here 32. See also Virginia Burrus and Stephen D. Moore, "Performing Sadomasochism in the Song of Songs," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 13 (2002): 129–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700208571398.

versus bad sex. In both sorts of readings, domination is dangerous in a sexual context. But could there instead be something enticing about the coincidence of sex and danger? And so I return to the question with which I began this chapter: what other meanings might this danger convey?

To confront these notions of good or bad sex, Burrus and Moore turn to Roland Boer's fancifully oversexed reading of the Song in his chapter "Night Sprinkle(s)." Among many other things, Boer reads Song 5:2–9—typically and plausibly read as culminating in a scene of violence against the woman[25]—as a sadomasochistic scene that develops from fisting into "bondage, beating and pain" as "'the sentinels found' her, tied her up, 'beat' her and 'wounded' her, leaving her without her 'mantle' (5:7)."[26] According to Burrus and Moore, an approach like Boer's embraces the pornographic potential of the text by means of a strategic misreading: "Calculated misstep is the technique by which Boer's text begins to exceed and thereby escape the repressive regime of heteronormative sexuality."[27] If we take Boer's view, then, the Song is no longer a pristine paragon of "good sex" nor a damnable example of "bad sex"—it can be dirty, raucous, challenging, and yes, even dominating. In opening the text to the possibility of BDSM, Boer's reading offers danger a place within this love poem and resignifies it as desirable and disruptive. For Burrus and Moore, it is precisely the "structure of risk" inherent to domination "that, for its practitioners, accounts for much of

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[25] See, e.g., Exum, *Song of Songs*, 198.

[26] Roland Boer, "Night Sprinkle(s): Pornography and the Song of Songs," in *Knockin' on Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture*, Biblical Limits (London: Routledge, 1999), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203012383, 69 (nice).

[27] Burrus and Moore, "Unsafe Sex," 38.

its seductive appeal—and, indeed, lends it much of its subversive potential."[28] This does not of course preclude a reading of Song 5:2–9 as a depiction of coercive power against a battered woman, but it does open another possibility that takes "female fantasies of erotic violence seriously."[29] No reader should be ashamed of taking some delight in the domination depicted in this episode. The element of danger is what can make the scene sexy and interesting.

I ask, then, could similar elements of domination be seen in the predatory mammals of the Song, and what interpretive possibilities lie in the danger they represent? Like the seductive nature of Boer's retelling above, could the danger of foxes, lions, and leopards also be seductive? The foxes in 2:15, while predators, are not depicted hunting or devouring other animals but rather disturbing the grapevines in bloom. As so many commentators point out, the vineyard is a notable symbol of the woman's sexuality in the Song (cf. 1:6), so readers may imagine that these foxes are somehow inserting themselves into the woman's sexual business in some way. The foxes "ruin," "corrupt," or "destroy" (חבל, *CDCH*) the vineyards and thus threaten them. Some describe the canids' destructive activity etymologically, suggesting that the Hebrew שׁוּעָל "denotes an animal which digs into and dwells in the earth, for it means 'the burrower.'"[30] Likewise, Delitzsch says, "This word is from שָׁעַל (R. שׁל), to go down, or into the depth."[31] The idea that these

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[28] Burrus and Moore, "Unsafe Sex," 49.

[29] Burrus and Moore, "Unsafe Sex," 48.

[30] Harper, *The Song of Solomon*, 17.

[31] Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. M. G. Easton, Clark's Foreign Theological Library 4/54 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1891), 54.

foxes may “go down” on her vineyards is not so far-fetched when the very next verse may also describe oral sex as well,[32] but the case for the etymological connection between Hebrew “fox” and a verb like “go down” or “burrow” is not a strong one.[33]

Other readers, then, will describe the foxes ravishing the grapevines in more explicit language. Michael Goulder paints an evocative picture as he argues, “Fox-cubs, with their long, slim muzzles ending in rounded tips, make ideal male sex-symbols. [… T]he action of the fox-cub’s muzzle, poking up into the vines, may be sufficiently suggestive.”[34] Yair Zakovitch might agree, as he explains the “little foxes” (שֻׁעָלִים קְטַנִּים) thus: “Möglicherweise ist mit dem »Kleinen« auch das männliche Glied gemeint, mit dem Männer im weiblichen Weinberg Schaden anrichten können” (“‘Little’ possibly also refers to the male member with which men can cause harm in the female vineyard”).[35] Here the oral collides with the genital as the foxes’ muzzles, with their small size and their probing, penetrative action, stand in for the penises of unspecified men, likely potential suitors. Zakovitch admits the potential of “harm” (*Schaden*) with this picture, so there is something of a risk that accompanies these phallic vulpine snouts, but perhaps a pleasurable one. The muzzles of these foxes blur the lines between the sexuality of humans and nonhumans and make the danger of their fanged maws seductive.

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[32] Case, “Cunning Linguists.”

[33] BDB distinguishes between a שׁעל-I meaning something like “hollow” and a separate שׁעל-II that refers to foxes. *DCH* makes no effort to connect שׁוּעָל to the verbal root שׁעל. Scholars who suggest this etymological connection are relatively few.

[34] Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 36 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 24.

[35] Yair Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 160.

Much attention has been paid to this risk that these potential suitors *qua* foxes pose to the woman herself or to the couple's relationship as a whole, and this is not unreasonable given the gender hierarchies of the ancient world and our current world as well. However, one should also note that the main action in 2:15 is not the disruptive burrowing of the foxes but rather the speaker's command to "hold, seize, grasp" (אֶחֱזוּ, *CDCH*) them. The verb אחז is used also in Isaiah 5:29 to describe lions hunting their prey, so one could possibly see a reversal here: who is the danger to whom? who is the dominant party? who is hunting whom? It appears that the fox has become prey—the predator in this verse has become the pursued. A few commentators explore this aspect of the verse, such as Duane Garrett:

> What is meaningful is that this is a call to join a chase—a chase that is really a game. The operative metaphor, therefore, is not the foxes or the vineyard but the chase itself. It is the kind of childlike play that young lovers often engage in. The verse thus speaks of the playfulness of love. He is calling her away to a game.[36]

In this reading, the man is the speaker, inviting his lover into a game of chase where the couple may playfully enjoy one another. A precise identification for the metaphorical foxes then is not necessary—they stand in only as objects of pursual, and the action itself is the point. Exum, on the other hand, sees the woman as "speaking on behalf of women in general," encouraging each one to grab a man for herself:

> The important thing for us is not to enjoy the random fox but to catch a fox for our very own (each of us, her own fox). These free and easy young men need to be caught, seized hold of and brought home (here the imperative "catch" or "seize" [*ʾḥz*] is indefinite; who does the catching is not specified). This is the goal that the woman achieves in 3:4, when she seizes her lover—again the verb is *ʾḥz*—and refuses to let him go until she has brought him to her mother's house.

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[36] Duane A. Garrett, "Song of Songs," in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 394; see also Duane A. Garrett, "The Song of Songs," in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 160–61.

> (In the scenario of our verse, one assumes that, ideally, the man is caught and brought home for good.)[37]

Here, the chase has a goal, namely to capture a man for oneself. The predatory fox is the hunted, with the amorous woman as the hunter, hoping that her chase ends with her prey "caught and brought home for good." Finally, Berlin also emphasizes the chase:

> The little foxes are (potential) male lovers, young in age and in sexual experience—just beginning their sexual exploits. The vineyards sprouting grapes are the women who are just maturing sexually and are ready for love. "Catch us some foxy young men who are looking for lovemaking," say these women, "and let them come and 'plunder' our now-budding 'vineyards.'" This is a playful request for lovemaking.[38]

For her, the desire to "catch" the foxes does not stem from a concern about preventing their mischievous digging among the vines—in fact, the command to seize them comes about *in order that* the foxes may nuzzle around in women's "vineyards." Thus, it is not the man taking charge but rather the woman exerting the initiative here. The woman invites an active participation in the hunt—she takes the dominant role in seeking to seize the foxes for her pleasure. In all of these readings, the excitement of sexuality does not come from docility or domesticity but rather from the action of the chase. Safety and equality are not the values expressed here—instead, it is the hierarchy implied in the fox hunt that brings the joy of domination to sex.

What then of the danger posed by the lionesses and leopards of Song 4:8? How do the contours of hunter and hunted appear here? While most commentators see the big cats as (representative of) an undesirable danger to the woman or to their relationship, not

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[37] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 130, brackets original.

[38] Adele Berlin, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, ed. Peter Machinist, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025), https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.17681865, 77.

everyone is so cautious. Augustin Calmet, for instance, sees the woman embracing her perilous setting: she is “toute occupée de la chaſſe des lions, & des léopards” (“entirely occupied with the chase of the lions and leopards”) and “une vierge fiére, & indomptée, qui ne veut point quitter ſes demeures ſauvages” (“a proud and untamed virgin who does not want to leave her wild resting places”).[39] Far from being hunted by these predators, she herself is the hunter, a formidable force who is at home in the wilderness. Similarly, Othmar Keel connects the felines to goddesses and so argues that the Song portrays the woman with divine strength: “This attribution applied especially to the warlike Ishtar. Her dominion over predatory animals illustrates her wild, unbroken, unapproachable, and virgin power.”[40] For Heinrich Graetz, the man of the poem pursues his lover not in spite of but because of the danger: “er die Gefahr aufsuchen wolle—weil sie ihm Muth einflösst, die Gefahren zu überwinden” (“he wants to seek out danger—because she instills him with the courage to overcome the dangers”).[41] He is not saving a damsel in distress but rather running headlong into the mouth of the beast, all in the name of his affection for the woman. Likewise, Francis Landy sees her in a position of fearless authority over her surroundings: “She thus dominates nature, apparently unafraid and unharmed, among dens of lions, the mountains of leopards.”[42] The woman is sexy but

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[39] Augustin Calmet, *Commentaire literal sur tous les livres de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Testament, vol. 5: L’Ecclésiaste, Le cantique des cantiques, La sagesse, L’ecclésiastique, et Isaie* (Paris: Emery, 1713), 2:222.

[40] Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 158.

[41] Heinrich Hirsch Graetz, *Schir Ha-Schirim/שיר השירים oder das Salomonische Hohelied übersetz und kritisch erläutert* (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1871), 160.

[42] Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 97.

certainly not safe as she stands alongside and even above fearsome predators.

Some commentators note the uncharacteristic representation of the woman's gender in her dominant depiction here. Carol Meyers observes that "the female is the one associated with the wild beasts and with their wild habitations," and she marvels at the woman's departure from traditional norms: "Nothing would be further from a domestic association for a female. Nor does the wildness, danger, might, strength, aggressiveness, and other dramatic features of these predators fit any stereotypical female qualities."[43] Anne Létourneau also points to the subversive aspects of the woman's predatory associations: "These images not only disrupt normative gender power relations through the tropes of 'woman-as-predator' and 'man-as-prey,' they also unsettle clear distinctions between humans, non-humans, animals, gods, and goddesses."[44] In this reading, the connection of the woman to carnivorous mammals upends gendered expectations and even blurs the lines between human and nonhuman. Her leonine and leopardine features come to the fore as she herself becomes the source of danger.

Still other commentators leave behind the trappings of vanilla sex as they reveal the seductive and enticing nature of her danger. Exum asserts, "Lions and leopards are beautiful and threatening. This is no chance conjunction, for so is the woman. […] Not only are lions and leopards not approachable, they are predators. There is thus a hint of

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[43] Carol Meyers, "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 209–23, here 216.

[44] Anne Létourneau, "From Wild Beast to Huntress: Animal Imagery, Beauty, and Seduction in the Song of Songs and Proverbs," *Biblical Interpretation* 31 (2021): 67–93, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-20211613, here 87.

danger here. The man wants to be the woman's captive."[45] Here, the man's positioning of the woman alongside these big cats means he has imagined the woman as a dominatrix. She is a feline femme fatale: "The awe the woman inspires is part of her attraction, and so her presence in this fantastic setting transforms it into a place of terrible beauty and enchantment."[46] Exum's reading verges on BDSM, as she sees the man desiring domination, reminiscent of Boer's reading of the woman's submissive sexual fantasies in Song 5:2–9. We can see parallels to Boer's imagined bondage ("'the sentinels found' her, tied her up") in Exum's suggestion that the man longs "to be the woman's captive." In a similar vein, Patrick Hunt connects the lion imagery of Song 4:8 with the prior gazelle imagery of the Song: "there might even be an animal transformation—even intensification—from gazelle to lion as the lion [or lioness] ravishes the gazelle as a result of awakened sexuality."[47] Just a few verses earlier in 4:5, the woman's breasts were compared to gentle fauns, but now in 4:8 she is a ravenous lioness, while the man, as we saw in Song 2:8–17, remains a leaping gazelle. Hunt imagines a kinky predator-prey scene, with her lioness dominating his gazelle, and he finds parallels to this image in ancient Egyptian art: "this same animal pair ends up in a human bed together as the phallic-ready Lion mounts the spread-legged antelope lying in bed."[48] These carnivorous comparisons imply the threat of being eaten, recalling the woman's desire to be grazed

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[45] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 169.

[46] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 169.

[47] Patrick Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*, Studies in Biblical Literature 96 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 156, brackets original.

[48] Hunt, *Poetry in the Song of Songs*, 157.

upon by the man *qua* gazelle or sheep, seen previously in chapters 3 and 4 above.[49]

Furthermore, Létourneau takes this train of thought to its ultimate conclusion:

> Will she pounce and eat him? In this verse, the playful imagery depicting the lovers gently eating and drinking each other has the potential to turn brutal with the felines and their mistress. For a brief moment, a different side of her beauty and eroticism is revealed, which accommodates terror and death over and against mutuality.[50]

She admits a light-hearted side to the imagery of 4:8 but also considers the possibility of something scarier. Unlike the early feminist scholars who praised the Song's lack of domination, Létourneau sees in this verse a lack of "mutuality," which in spite of its risk is still nonetheless fully a feature of the woman's "beauty and eroticism." For Exum, Hunt, and Létourneau, danger and domination can be sexy.

Not everyone, of course, is reading verses like these with just one hand. Robert Jenson, in his commentary for the Interpretation series, worries that one might go too far with the text of the Song and advises that "we must take no delight in making sex 'dirty.'"[51] Whereas Burrus and Moore aim to expose readers' implicit ideas of good and bad sex, Jenson aims to reinforce his own conceptual structure around which types of sexuality are acceptable, and it is the looming specter of BDSM in particular that scares him: "Sadomasochism, bondage, and the like are not harmless deviations; they are attacks

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[49] A carnivorous reading of Song 4:8 would then be the lone exception to the conclusion in Athalya Brenner, "The Food of Love: Gendered Food and Food Imagery in the Song of Songs," *Semeia* 86 (1999): 101–12, that "[t]he world of the SoS is vegetarian. No animals die in it, in order to become food or otherwise" (109). Brenner goes on to mention bring up the case of the woman being "associated with lions and leopards," which could entail danger, "but only potentially" (110). The commentators I cite above explore that potential in all of its seductiveness.

[50] Létourneau, "From Wild Beast to Huntress," 78.

[51] Robert W. Jenson, *Song of Songs*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 36.

on humanity."[52] For him, a dominating reading of Song 2:15 or 4:8 would certainly be "dirty," but more than that, it would stand opposed to what is properly human. To dominate or to be dominated, or to desire to do either, is to debase oneself and therefore to engage in a less-than-human "deviation." But if we take a view of these verses as seen in readings like those examined above, we might question whether proper "humanity" should be the goal in the first place, as it seems to be for Jenson. If some sex acts are dirtier and more animalistic than others, perhaps this is a feature, not a bug! Inasmuch as the man wants to be the woman's "captive" (per Exum), it is precisely because of her predatory dominance. It is not simply her human aspects that the man finds attractive; rather, her leonine attributes also add to her appeal. Whereas Jenson would establish clear boundaries between human and nonhuman, in these readings the dominating woman's rupture of those boundaries is the very thing that makes these verses erotic. There is a sensual pleasure to be found in seeing the man as a hunted fox or the dominating woman as the fierce carnivore.

With this focus on BDSM and especially dominance, perhaps these verses about predators may be profitably compared to *Crocodile Blondee*. As I noted before, the pornographic film is not sadomasochistic, but the titular blonde Rita is absolutely an aggressor. She repeatedly initiates sexual contact, with a frequency and voracity that places her firmly in the role of the predator. As the voiceover at the end says of Rita, so also it may be said of Song 2:15's fox-hunting woman or of Song 4:8's lion- and leopard-coded woman: "she bites." Both the film and these verses (can be said to) embrace the

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[52] Jenson, *Song of Songs*, 36.

figure of a dominant female lover. There can be pleasure in exploring aggression and control.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I'll note that the predatory verses of the Song may be like *Crocodile Blondee* in yet another way. The evidence is unclear in the case of 2:15, the identity of whose speaker remains debated, but in the case of 4:8, the verse follows a descriptive poem from the lips of the man (4:1–7) and seems to be a continuation of his voice, as he beckons the woman, "With me from Lebanon, my bride / With me from Lebanon you will come" (אִתִּי מִלְּבָנוֹן֙ כַּלָּ֔ה אִתִּ֖י מִלְּבָנ֣וֹן תָּב֑וֹאִי). As the man beseeches his "bride," it seems that it is *he* who imagines her in the midst of big cats and *he* who places her in this distant and perilous setting. This predatory BDSM fantasy is one of his own making, not the woman's own representation of herself. Like the film, with its gratuitous shots of female nudity and its over-the-top depiction of a woman's libidinous excess, so also this dominating reading of Song 4:8 would position it as entirely the fantasy of a heterosexual male. The woman in the poem does not self-identify as a predator; rather, this is how she is constructed by the man's gaze as he calls to her. Both the poem and the film depict a fiction in which the man need not do the work of sexual pursuit—instead, he is titillated by the idea of the woman desiring him and taking charge.

Like the woman, so also the foxes, lions, and leopards are equally objects of an external gaze. Song 2:15 and 4:8 are not encounters with the animals' "real" selves or an expression of their own self-image but rather a production of the gaze. Plumwood's meditation on her experience of the crocodile attack mentions crocodiles frequently, as one would expect, but interestingly, at one point she also mentions lions alongside them:

"Large predators like lions and crocodiles are the subjects of an obsessive gaze in contemporary popular culture."[53] Nowhere else in that essay does the subject of another predator come up, except in this very context about this "obsessive gaze" from humans. Lions and their ilk are cast as villains with no consent of their own, and these third-party stories told about them can have harmful effects.

This brings us full circle to Plumwood's original point with her reflection on her near-death experience, which she elucidates when she mentions lions once again in her later book on the subject:

> But humans *are* food, food for sharks, lions, tigers, bears and crocodiles, food for crows, snakes, vultures, pigs, rats and goannas, and for a huge variety of smaller creatures and micro-organisms. An ecological animalism would acknowledge this and affirm principles emphasising human–animal mutuality, equality and reciprocity in the food web.[54]

Coming face to face with a crocodile showed her a commonality (or perhaps a common animality) between herself and the reptile, which led her to rethink her place in the world. Humans and their others share the struggle for survival, the drive toward sexuality, and the vulnerability of being subject to the gaze and control of outsiders. Plumwood's ruminations encourage us to take these commonalities as grounds for better efforts at coexistence.

As I draw together the various threads of Plumwood, *Crocodile Blondee*, sex, and danger, I recognize the potential irony of highlighting Plumwood's call for "mutuality, equality and reciprocity" alongside readings of the Song that highlight domination and

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[53] Plumwood, "Being Prey," 145.

[54] Plumwood, *The Eye of the Crocodile*, 18, emphasis original.

hierarchy in Song 2:15 and 4:8. However, the danger that these readings have reveled in is fantastical, the seductive stuff of poetry, the reframing of real-world hierarchies to fit imaginative erotic scenarios. The real-world hierarchies themselves, on the other hand, are quite different, as questions of consent and mutual pleasure do not take often pride of place in discussions of human treatment of nonhuman animals. Sexual delight in sadomasochistic perversity is not the same thing as support of coercive repression, as any BDSM practitioner will tell you.

By reading Song 2:15 and 4:8 alongside biblical scholars and animal studies, this chapter has shown a common experience of both vulnerability and sexuality across multiple animal species. Plumwood's (unintentional?) misreading of *Crocodile Blondee* and Boer's (strategic) misreading of the Song of Songs raise the prospect of danger and domination in sex. The fox may rustle around in the grapevines, but the woman of Song 2:15 may also take delight in hunting him. And if the lions and leopards of Song 4:8 are dangerous, then the woman can be as well, even in defiance of expected gender norms. What's more, this danger need not take away from the eroticism of the verse but may indeed enhance it, as the man can be interpreted as submissively wanting the very danger that she exhibits. Thus, the man blends with the foxes—he is the hunted and dominated—while the woman blends with the lions and leopards—she is huntress, predator, and dominatrix. She displays an aggressive pursuing sexuality like Rita from the pornographic film. The lines of human and nonhuman blur as the poet describes the lovers in animal terms, not in spite of their animality but rather in order to highlight it. In these verses, perhaps the reader can picture what Plumwood might describe as a view "from the outside," a perspective that displaces the subject from the center of one's

narrative. A delicious danger can be found in sex as humans imagine themselves animalistically, but at the same time, Plumwood's insights lead us to notice not just the shared experience of sexuality but also all creatures' vulnerability and need for care.

CHAPTER 6: DIVIDING AND UNITING WITH THE BIRDS OF THE SONG

Introduction

This chapter turns from the Song's mammals to the other well-represented class in the Song—birds. On three occasions, the man in the Song refers to his lover as "my dove" (יוֹנָתִי), twice speaking to her and once speaking about her:

יוֹנָתִ֞י בְּחַגְוֵ֣י הַסֶּ֗לַע	My dove, in the cleft of the rock,
בְּסֵ֙תֶר֙ הַמַּדְרֵגָ֔ה	In the secret place of the cliff,
הַרְאִ֙ינִי֙ אֶת־מַרְאַ֔יִךְ	Let me see your face,
הַשְׁמִיעִ֖ינִי אֶת־קוֹלֵ֑ךְ	Let me hear your voice,
כִּֽי־קוֹלֵ֥ךְ עָרֵ֖ב	For your voice is sweet,
וּמַרְאֵ֥יךְ נָאוֶֽה׃	And your face is lovely. (2:14)

אֲנִ֥י יְשֵׁנָ֖ה וְלִבִּ֣י עֵ֑ר	I am asleep, but my heart stirs.
ק֣וֹל ׀ דּוֹדִ֣י דוֹפֵ֗ק	The voice of my beloved knocks:
פִּתְחִי־לִ֞י אֲחֹתִ֤י רַעְיָתִי֙	"Open to me, my sister, my darling,
יוֹנָתִ֣י תַמָּתִ֔י	My dove, my blameless one,
שֶׁרֹּאשִׁי֙ נִמְלָא־טָ֔ל	For my head is filled with dew,
קְוֻּצּוֹתַ֖י רְסִ֥יסֵי לָֽיְלָה׃	My locks of hair with drops of the night." (5:2)

אַחַ֥ת הִיא֙ יוֹנָתִ֣י תַמָּתִ֔י	Only she is my dove, my blameless one,
אַחַ֥ת הִיא֙ לְאִמָּ֔הּ	Only she is her mother's,
בָּרָ֥ה הִ֖יא לְיֽוֹלַדְתָּ֑הּ	Pure is she to the one who bore her.
רָא֤וּהָ בָנוֹת֙ וַֽיְאַשְּׁר֔וּהָ	Daughters saw her and called her blessed.
מְלָכ֥וֹת וּפִֽילַגְשִׁ֖ים וַֽיְהַלְלֽוּהָ׃	Queens and lovers praised her. (6:9)

Twice more the man refers more specifically to the eyes of the woman, casting them metaphorically as doves:

הִנָּ֤ךְ יָפָה֙ רַעְיָתִ֔י	Behold, you are beautiful, my darling.
הִנָּ֥ךְ יָפָ֖ה	Behold, you are beautiful.
עֵינַ֥יִךְ יוֹנִֽים׃	Your eyes are doves. (1:15)

הִנָּ֨ךְ יָפָ֤ה רַעְיָתִי֙	Behold, you are beautiful, my darling.
הִנָּ֣ךְ יָפָ֔ה	Behold, you are beautiful.
עֵינַ֣יִךְ יוֹנִ֔ים מִבַּ֖עַד לְצַמָּתֵ֑ךְ	Your eyes are doves from behind your veil.
שַׂעְרֵךְ֙ כְּעֵ֣דֶר הָֽעִזִּ֔ים	Your hair is like a flock of goats

שֶׁגָּלְשׁוּ מֵהַר גִּלְעָד׃ That is flowing from the mountain of Gilead. (4:1)

Not to be outdone, the woman also deploys avian imagery in her own descriptive poem about the man. Here, the raven (עוֹרֵב) makes its only appearance, in a simile describing the man’s dark hair (5:11), and the woman goes on to renew the connection between eyes and doves, this time with more detailed staging of the scene as the doves bathe (5:12):

רֹאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פָּז His head is refined gold.
קְוּצּוֹתָיו תַּלְתַּלִּים His locks of hair are wavy,
שְׁחֹרוֹת כָּעוֹרֵב׃ Black like the raven.
עֵינָיו כְּיוֹנִים עַל־אֲפִיקֵי מָיִם His eyes are like doves over channels of water,
רֹחֲצוֹת בֶּחָלָב Washed in milk,
יֹשְׁבוֹת עַל־מִלֵּאת׃ Dwelling over a pond. (5:11–12)

The final feathered figure is the turtledove (תּוֹר), heralding the arrival of spring with the sound of its voice:

הַנִּצָּנִים נִרְאוּ בָאָרֶץ The blossoms are seen in the land.
עֵת הַזָּמִיר הִגִּיעַ The time of pruning/singing[1] has come.
וְקוֹל הַתּוֹר And the voice of the turtledove
נִשְׁמַע בְּאַרְצֵנוּ׃ Is heard in our land. (2:12)

The turtledove is the only bird in the Song that does not represent a part or the whole of one of the lovers but rather features as a part of the natural scenery.

My entrance into the avian imagery in this chapter comes through an examination of the boundaries drawn between living creatures—between humans and other animals as well as between different species of birds. Not only these but also the lines *within* species—those separating human from human or bird from bird. I make use of two conceptual tools to describe the structure and function of these dividing lines. First, Giorgio Agamben’s philosophical work and his concept of the anthropological machine

[1] For more on the translation “singing/pruning” (הַזָּמִיר), see the discussion of Song 2:12 in chap. 2 above.

has been very influential for scholars of animal studies. For Agamben, the concept of *Homo sapiens* is “a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human.”[2] There is no true essence that can define the human—no set of characteristics or qualifications that would demarcate a singular border between humans and other creatures—so the anthropological machine steps in to do the work of producing the human. This anthropological machine is, as Matthew Calarco summarizes, “a *performative* apparatus, inasmuch as it enacts and calls into being (which is to say, performs) a certain reality. It is the machine itself that creates, reproduces, and maintains the distinction between human life and animal life.”[3] There is no pre-existing line that would include the human and exclude nonhuman animals, so this dividing line is manufactured through the anthropological machine. For the modern West, says Agamben, the anthropological machine primarily operates by way of language: “it functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human: *Homo alalus*, or the ape-man.”[4] Language comes to delimit the boundary between human and nonhuman life, but this boundary is constructed by excluding “the nonhuman within the human.” What is most significant about this machine is the fact of its operation *within* the human, as Calarco notes: “This process of separation takes place first and foremost, [Agamben]

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[2] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804767064, 26.

[3] Matthew Calarco, *Thinking through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 54, italics original.

[4] Agamben, *The Open*, 37.

argues, in and through human beings themselves."[5] As a result of this process of anthropogenesis, this production of the human, those individuals who might otherwise be classified as technically members of the human species end up falling on the wrong side of that line. The anthropological machine constructs what is viewed as properly human by means of cordoning off those humans who don't exhibit an adequate degree of said proper humanity. The line between human and animal thus starts *in the human*, resulting in members of *Homo sapiens* being cast out to the animal side of the line. In this way, boundaries can divide a species internally, separating out parts of it as not adequately or entirely proper to the species.

My second insight in approaching the boundaries in and around the birds and humans of the Song comes from Ken Stone's reading of dogs in Exodus. In Exodus 11, Moses reports Yahweh's announcement of the tenth and final plague, namely that the firstborn of the Egyptians shall die, and notably this includes *every* firstborn—even "all the firstborn of the beast" (וְכֹל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה, Exod 11:5). In contrast, Israel will receive much more favorable treatment. Yahweh says in 11:7 that dogs will not "growl" (CEB, ESV, NRSVue) or "bark" (NET, NIV)—literally "a dog will not sharpen its tongue" (יֶחֱרַץ־כֶּלֶב לְשֹׁנוֹ)—at the Israelites. And just as with the inclusion of all firstborn of Egypt, both human and nonhuman, so also here the dogs will not threaten *any* Israelite, "man or beast" (לְמֵאִישׁ וְעַד־בְּהֵמָה). As Stone puts it, we see here that "the actions taken, or rather not taken, by these dogs cut across the boundary between animal and human. For the text is explicit about the fact that the dogs will not move their tongues against either human

[5] Calarco, *Thinking through Animals*, 53.

Israelites *or their animals*."[6] For Yahweh's purposes, then, the most significant line of demarcation is not that dividing humans from nonhuman animals—rather, it is national identity that becomes the most important, with animals of both human and nonhuman species all included within one or the other nation. Stone goes on: "Thus, there are humans and animals who die among the Egyptians, and humans and animals who live among the Israelites."[7] This division along national rather than species lines is not an incidental observation. The text is explicit that "Yahweh will make a distinction between Egypt and Israel" (יַפְלֶה יְהוָה בֵּין מִצְרַיִם וּבֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל, Exod 11:7). As a result, species lines begin to blur as national lines rise to greater importance: "God's actions for life and death transgress the division between humans and animals and are taken instead on the basis of a distinction between Egypt and Israel."[8]

From these two writers, Agamben and Stone, I take the insight that the lines that separate one category from another may be drawn variously, arbitrarily, and unexpectedly. Sometimes, as in Agamben, a line may be drawn *within* a single species and thus set up a distinction between the more and less properly human. At other times, as in Stone's discussion, lines may be drawn *across* species boundaries in ways that blur the differences between species and instead highlight other aspects shared in common. The types of dividing lines and the placement of those lines cannot be assumed beforehand or taken as universal constants. Divisions can be intra-species or cross-

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[6] Ken Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 62, italics original.

[7] Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies*, 62.

[8] Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies*, 62.

species depending on the context. What remains, then, is navigating how these sorts of lines might be drawn by the poet(s) of the Song of Songs.

This chapter shows how these ornithological and anthropological lines divide and unite in the Song of Songs, in its cultural background, and for readers today. First, I begin with some setup by describing the divisions of bird and human elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Second, I examine the English language's internal division of family Columbidae between dove and pigeon, as well as the connotations of each term and their ramifications for interpretation of the Song. Finally, keeping in mind all of these divisions separating bird from human and bird from bird, I explore the ways that the two lovers are united in the Song's dove and raven imagery, as these nonhuman animals come to partition the two of them apart from everyone else and bring the lovers together. This connection by means of bird imagery is yet another instance in which we can see a blurring between human and animal.

Dividing Human and Bird Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible

We begin this analysis of the intra- and interspecies boundaries in the Song with an overview of some of the biblical background of the Song. The human writers of the Hebrew Bible's legal texts, for instance, consciously divide different types of birds from one another. The legislation around which animals are clean versus unclean is perhaps one of the more notable such lines of division. The raven, among a number of other species, is explicitly identified as ritually impure and therefore as unfit for human consumption (Lev 11:15; Deut 14:14). As humans separate one bird from another, categorizing and classifying them, so also humans separate themselves from those unclean birds. The human mouth is a threshold that should not be crossed improperly in

the Levitical or Deuteronomic mind. Unlike for mammals or water creatures, which have definite criteria to qualify for ritual purity, such as cloven hooves or fins and scales, the unclean birds are simply named individually, with no markers specified as to what morphological or behavioral characteristics might make them clean. While doves eat fruits and seeds, ravens are known to be carrion feeders, which, as an impure behavior for an observant follower of Deuteronomy 14:21, may be an activity that makes ravens similarly distasteful. Scavenging may also be the implication at play in the corvid association with ruin and chaos in Isaiah 34:11; here, Edom will be destroyed, leaving it as fodder for ravens. Similarly, they appear as agents of punishment for disobedient children in Proverbs 30:17. However, even if ravens are unfit for consumption and at times made to be the consequences for human misbehavior, they remain a part of Yahweh's created order, so he cares for them (Ps 147:9; Job 38:41) and even employs them to care for others (1 Kgs 17:4, 6).

Various species of doves, in contrast, number among the birds that fall on the other side of the purity line, being acceptable for alimentary and sacrificial purposes. They avoid ravens' occasional associations with destruction and punishment, but the fact that doves are not linked to carrion and castigation makes them ritually pure and therefore more available for human use. The flesh of doves was a food source in the ancient world, and a handy one at that: as Edwin Firmage puts it, dove meat "comes, as it were, packaged in convenient meal-sized units produced with modest expense."[9] Doves also bridge the divide between human and divine by providing acceptable sacrificial food to

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[9] Edwin Firmage, "Zoology (Fauna)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:1109–67, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261929-801, here 1145.

Yahweh as well (e.g., Lev 1:14), so in spite of their vast differences, creator and creation alike may share in this cuisine. As a result, doves' position on the "clean" side of the purity line does not entail their safety—quite the opposite. The clean/unclean boundary in animals marks a line between life and death, between lives available for sacrificial slaughter and lives that aren't.

The human authors of these biblical texts draw lines between types of birds, but they also use these birds to draw lines between different types of humans. Leviticus 5, for instance, seems to expect a sheep or goat as the default sacrificial animal for a guilt offering, but such an animal demands the land and resources necessary to raise it or the money or valuables to trade for it. This measure of capital is not available to every devotee, so the Priestly tradition makes allowances for people who are less wealthy by allowing a sacrifice of "two turtledoves or two young doves" (שְׁתֵּי תֹרִים אֹו־שְׁנֵי בְנֵי־יוֹנָה, Lev 5:7), which is a much lower bar to meet, as smaller animals require less food and other resources to rear. But even a pair of birds may be out of reach for some, so a small amount of flour is also acceptable from those for whom this is the only feasible sacrifice (Lev 5:11). Doves, therefore, serve as a marker of class lines among humans, dividing rich from poor. The wealthiest worshippers may be seen bringing the larger and more labor-intensive animals as their gifts to Yahweh, while the most impoverished must resort to a donation of plant rather than animal material. An avian offering thus identifies a certain type of human, one located at a middle stratum of the class hierarchy. This sacrificial system devised by humans comes to be a method of dividing humans by means of the death of doves.

Legislation around ritual purity and sacrifice is not explicitly present in the Song,

but it forms the biblical background against which the Song is set. This context shows how humans draw lines that are not necessarily and certainly not exclusively based on species. For the purposes of the legal writers, the various kinds of unclean birds like ravens are named individually, but the other side of that line contains the undifferentiated mass of clean birds, unnamed and unspecified. It is not their species differences that matter but rather which side of the pure/impure division they fall on. Humans, in contrast, as agents of sacrificial rites, are not lumped altogether but rather divided three ways based on the type of sacrifice their material resources allow them to offer. The point here is that these lines of division are not always based on denoting one species vs. another but rather on arbitrary sociocultural criteria. For purity purposes, doves are joined with all other clean birds, with no distinction, but for sacrificial purposes, doves mark a line between different categories of human along equally arbitrary class lines. There are so many ways of grouping earth's life forms, and species is often not the primary criterion. This insight sets the stage for our examination of the birds in Song of Songs, in which we'll explore how these lines unite or divide the lovers and their metaphorical animal comparisons.

Dividing Dove and Pigeon

A line of division runs within the dove itself, particularly in the modern Anglophone world and with significant ramifications for translation and commentary. This line concerns the possible English glosses for יוֹנָה in the Song and the meanings that adhere to different names. A popular and likely species identification for the Song's doves is

Columba livia,[10] which is commonly found in Palestine and so fits the poem's geographic context then as today,[11] but depending on the source, the English nomenclature for this creature varies. The International Ornithological Committee lists it as a "rock dove," while the National Audubon Society calls it a "rock pigeon."[12] Many more sources use one name or the other because pigeons and doves are essentially the same creature.

Why, then, two words for one bird? The diverging names come in part from distinct etymological histories, with "dove" coming from Germanic roots and "pigeon" imported to English from French via the Normans. Size can be another factor in distinguishing them, as in general, larger members of Columbidae can be referred to as pigeons and smaller members as doves.[13] In addition, "dove" frequently refers to the wild variety, whereas "pigeon" points more to domesticated animals—the human practice of breeding pigeons for their unique and dazzling color palettes yields the term "fancy pigeon,"[14] for instance, and the city-dwelling bird is often a "feral pigeon" in the

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[10] Yehuda Feliks, *Song of Songs: Nature Epic and Allegory* (Jerusalem: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1983), 18.

[11] Abdel Fattah N. Abd Rabou and Mohammed A. Abd Rabou, "Notes on the Pigeons and Doves (Family Columbidae) Occurring in the Gaza Strip – Palestine," *Jordan Journal of Natural History* 6 (2019): 30–38.

[12] Frank Gill, David Donsker, and Pamela Rasmussen, eds., *IOC World Bird List 13.1* (n.p.: International Ornithological Committee, 2023), https://doi.org/10.14344/ioc.ml.13.1; "Rock Pigeon," *Audubon*, https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/rock-pigeon, adapted from Kenn Kaufman, *Lives of North American Birds* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1996).

[13] David Gibbs, Eustace Barnes, and John Cox, *Pigeons and Doves: A Guide to the Pigeons and Doves of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 13; Barbara Allen, *Pigeon*, Animal (London: Reaktion, 2009), 20.

[14] See, as examples of the use of the term throughout time, John Matthews Eaton, *A Treatise on the Art of Breeding and Managing Tame, Domesticated, and Fancy Pigeons* (London: John Matthews Eaton, 1852); Danuta Majewska and Tomasz Drenikowski, "Analysis of Reproduction and Growth in Fancy Pigeons," *Acta Scientarium Polonorum Zootechnica* 15 (2016): 41–52, https://doi.org/10.21005/asp.2016.15.1.04.

literature, indicating their histories as escapees from domestication.[15] Yet another distinction between the two words is that doves are frequently characterized as white and pigeons as having various other colors, especially grey. Writers often speak of a "snow-white dove"[16] or a "milk-white dove."[17]

However one draws the line, the difference between the dove and the pigeon, even while not being a strict biological boundary, is significant because it is not at all value-neutral. In the Anglophone world, doves generally carry positive connotations. Pablo Picasso has multiple works—called *Dove of Peace* in English—that have been used heavily by the United Nations as symbols of nonviolence, and doves often appear elsewhere as representations of the virtue of peace.[18] The Dove brand of soaps, lotions, and other beauty products draws on the dove's associations with beauty—a trait that, if the marketing is to be believed, can be conferred upon the consumer via use of said products. The dove is also associated with divinity, as "dove" is the usual English gloss for περιστερά, the form which the Holy Spirit appears to take at the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). In addition, angels are often depicted with brilliant

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[15] See, for instance, Richard F. Johnston and Marian Janiga, *Feral Pigeons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Dimitri Giunchi*, et al.*, "Feral Pigeons: Problems, Dynamics and Control Methods," in *Integrated Pest Management and Pest Control: Current and Future Tactics*, ed. Marcelo L. Larramendy and Sonia Soloneski (Rijeka, Croatia: InTech, 2012), 215–40.

[16] Among myriad examples, consider John Mason Neal, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (London: J. T. Hayes, 1867), 246.

[17] For example, Havilah Dharamraj, *Altogether Lovely: A Thematic and Intertextual Reading of the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1w6t9r3, 102.

[18] Allen, *Pigeon*, 143; Nel-Olivia Waga, "How Picasso's 'Dove of Peace' Became a Worldwide Symbol of Hope and Unity," *Forbes* (October 15, 2023), https://www.forbes.com/sites/neloliviawaga/2023/10/15/how-picassos-dove-of-peace-became-a-worldwide-symbol-of-hope-and-unity/.

white wings reminiscent of those of a dove.[19] The pigeon, in stark contrast, often takes the brunt of negativity. Mayor Ken Livingstone of London famously waged war on the pesky pigeons of Trafalgar Square, calling them "rats with wings."[20] Because of the risk of disease spread through their fecal matter, pigeons are regarded as a nuisance in urban environments, with construction companies and building managers installing bird control spikes on high-up perches and contracting with pest-control services to prevent and eliminate their presence. The fancy pigeons mentioned before can be valuable pets, but most of the pigeons the typical person encounters will be the grey and blue-green feral domesticated pigeon eking out a living alongside humans who are apathetic at best and antagonistic toward them at worst. The pure white dove stands for cherished ideals and values, but the colorful pigeon is often an unwanted bother. Not unlike Agamben's anthropological machine, there is something of an ornithological machine that runs in and through genus *Columba*, dividing the proper and virtuous from the improper and plain.

Because this artificial distinction between dove and pigeon is a complication for the English language and not for the original Hebrew, this difference only becomes an issue for the Song of Songs in translations. At the most basic level, the use of "dove" to translate יוֹנָה in English translations is practically universal, which itself says something about the positive associations of the dove being conferred onto the lovers in admiring love poetry. A number of scholars may note in their commentary that a יוֹנָה may also be a pigeon, but I am not aware of an instance of "pigeon" being used in an author's primary

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[19] Allen, *Pigeon*, 73–75.

[20] Sarah Lyall, "Rats with Wings? Or a 'Sweet' London Flock?", *International Herald Tribune* (June 19, 2006), https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/19/world/europe/19iht-journal.2005305.html.

translation. Clearly, to liken one's lover to a pigeon does not carry the same complimentary weight as to a dove.

But what do commentators do when the Song uses descriptors with connotations that lean more specifically dovelike or pigeonlike? For instance, the coloration of the Song's doves/pigeons is not stated explicitly, so commentators are left to use the surrounding context as well as their imaginations to fill in the gaps, and the choices they make can reveal the connotations they associate with the various views of the bird. The primary case study for the issue of pigeon pigmentation is Song 5:12, in which the woman describes her beloved's eyes as "like doves" (כְּיוֹנִים) that have been "washed in milk" (רֹחֲצוֹת בֶּחָלָב). As always, there is debate about what exactly the poet is imagining with these words. Is the *tertium comparationis* the movement of the dove? After all, as Michael Goulder notes, "the feature that marks out a dove is its fan-like tail. Doves *flutter*; and so do eyes."[21] Or is the referent of the metaphor the moistness of his eyes? Duane Garrett observes that "it is the washing of the dove that is the focus rather than the dove itself. This implies that his eyes are moist and sparkling. To put it negatively, the man does not have a dry, dead stare."[22] These readings are entirely plausible, but most readers appear drawn to a more colorful explanation. Christian Ginsburg exemplifies it well:

> The vivid and black pupils of his eyes, sparkling forth from the encircling lactean white, in which they are, as it were, bathing and sitting on the fountain of tears, resemble doves bathing gaily in pellucid streams. […] The words רֹחֲצוֹת בֶּחָלָב,

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[21] Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 36 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986), 5, emphasis original. This is one among a number of possibilities that Goulder presents.

[22] Duane A. Garrett, "The Song of Songs," in *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, Word Biblical Commentary 23B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 220.

> bathing in milk, referring to the eyes, are descriptive of the milky white in which the black pupils of the eyes are, as it were, bathing.[23]

Cheryl Exum also draws this conclusion: "Doves in pellucid pools, as though bathing in milk, suggest the pupil and iris surrounded by the wet milky whiteness of the eye."[24] The bird represents the pupil and/or iris, and the milk bath stands for the sclera, the white of the eye.

In this reading, it is quite unlikely that the bird is an angelic snow-white dove, as in that case it would not stand out from the surrounding milk, so it must be a darker color. This must be the rock pigeon, which "is grey-plumed, with wing-feathers a mixture of black and white, neck-feathers greenish."[25] F. Scott Spencer also highlights its "gray color," and Farley calls it "smoke grey,"[26] which is certainly closer to the feral pigeon of city streets than to the white dove of peace. Yair Zakovitch mysteriously goes further and even calls the bird black, like the raven in the preceding verse, perhaps drawing extra emphasis to the bird as iris or pupil.[27] So while "dove" may be the preferred English

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[23] Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs, Translated from the Original Hebrew, with a Commentary, Historical and Critical* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), 169.

[24] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 204–5. So also S. M. Lehrman, "The Song of Songs," in *The Five Megilloth: Hebrew Text, English Translation, and Commentary*, ed. A. Cohen, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino, 1959), 21; Daniel Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création: Commentaire du Cantique des Cantiques*, Lectio Divina 51 (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 84; Robert Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations: A Study, Modern Translation and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ktav, 1974), 91; Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 171–72; Adele Berlin, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*, ed. Peter Machinist, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025), https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.17681865, 135.

[25] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 18.

[26] F. Scott Spencer, *Song of Songs*, Wisdom Commentary 25 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 32; Farley, *The Song of Songs*, 46.

[27] Yair Zakovitch, *Das Hohelied*, Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2004), 223: "Der Übergang vom Haar zu den Augen ist veranschaulicht als Übergang von einem schwarzen Vogel zu einem anderen" ("The transition from hair to eyes is illustrated as a

translation, some readers can accept a more pigeonlike comparison insofar as the context of milk requires a darker bird to complete the optical visual. Notably, it is not the woman herself who is like a pigeon—rather it is her iris or pupil, already expected to be a dark color, that is like a milk-encircled pigeon.

Not everyone, however, envisions the specific outlines of the eye in 5:12's metaphor. For some, the presence of the white milk does not operate as a contrast from which the dark pupils would stand out, but rather it serves to emphasize the whiteness of the dove itself. For instance, Dianne Bergant wonders, "The mention of milk might be a reference to the white color of the doves."[28] Perhaps the milk, then, is not meant to be considered separate from the doves but instead as an evocative description of their color. Similarly, Othmar Keel opines, "The milk baths indicate that the poet is talking about white doves (cf. Gen. 49:12; Lam. 4:7). The white variety of the rock dove was particularly sacred to the goddess."[29] Elsewhere, he acknowledges the existence of the more common "blue-gray" variety of "common rock dove or rock pigeon,"[30] but in the case of 5:12, the bird in question must be white. In his reading, the poet's double stress on the color white (both lactically and ornithologically) indicates a proximity to divinity, a higher form of the bird than the ordinary blue-gray version. Michael Fox for his part cannot conceive why the bird would be a pupil to begin with: "what do the pupils have in

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transition from one black bird to another").

[28] Dianne Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 70.

[29] Othmar Keel, *The Song of Songs*, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 199.

[30] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 69.

common with doves, which are neither dark nor round? […] The image emphasizes whiteness and conveys a sense of luxury and delicacy, for milk was white, thick, and smooth. The contrast between the blackness of the boy's hair and the whiteness of his eyes is sharpened by the contrast between ravens (v. 11) and doves."[31] Not only does the white milk point toward a similarly white dove, but also the key contrast in this image is not between pupil and sclera but rather between the white dove and the black raven.

In general, then, Anglophone commentators favor the dove over the pigeon in their translations. In the cases in which they feel compelled to imagine a bird of a darker color, they may mention pigeons but still retain "dove" in their translations, perhaps because of the more complimentary connotations. Others, like Keel and Fox, refuse to imagine anything but a milky white dove. A line is drawn, then, through *Columba* that constructs the more valued "dove" by expelling the less valued "pigeon." Even while they are essentially the same creature, arbitrary constructions of human language and culture divide the species internally.

Dividing Raven and Dove

That last point from Fox brings the color of 5:11's raven into play. Because the text specifies that the referent of the corvid metaphor, the man's hair, is black (שְׁחֹרוֹת), there is universal agreement on the raven's color. It is certainly conceivable that the poet could have chosen to compare the man's locks to a raven of a different hue, as Yehuda Feliks

[31] Michael V. Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 148.

notes that "there are two other species [in Israel], but of greyish-black coloration."[32] Like doves/pigeons, there is no single monolithic exemplar but rather a diversity. But it is the black variety featured here, one with "glossy, iridescent, deep black plumage."[33] What connotations do scholars see in the raven's black feathers, and do they affect how one reads the color of the dove? Many scholars see implications of youth in the darkness of the man's hair: "Black hair implies youth and vigor; this is in contrast to gray hair, which naturally connotes age and experience (see Prov 20:29)."[34] The dark color "alludes to its youthful vitality."[35] Alongside youth comes strength, as John Phillips notes: "Bushy black hair symbolizes virility. It suggests a person in the prime of life, just as gray hair would suggest one worn out with the years. The secret of Samson's great strength lay in his Nazarite locks. Samson, shorn of his locks, was as weak as a kitten, but Samson with that hair tumbling down to his shoulders could rend a lion."[36] In contrast to the gentleness and softness of the white dove, the black raven symbolizes a potency, a display of young energy and strength, as well as the desirable sensual qualities this implies.

Others see a bit more mystery in the blackness of the man's hair. A few commentators, writing for what I must presume is a largely white audience, sense a need to offer extra explanation about why the woman may find such dark hair to be attractive.

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[32] Feliks, *Song of Songs*, 18.

[33] Berlin, *Song of Songs*, 133.

[34] Garrett, "The Song of Songs," 220; cf. Duane A. Garrett, "Song of Songs," in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 414.

[35] Gianni Barbiero, *Song of Songs: A Close Reading*, trans. Michael Tait, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 144 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004203259.i-542, 289; so also Nicholas Ayo, *Sacred Marriage: The Wisdom of the Song of Songs* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 185.

[36] John Phillips, *Exploring the Song of Solomon* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1984), 114.

Ginsburg asserts that black hair is "highly esteemed by the Orientals," and Nicholas Ayo offers the generalization that "Oriental peoples prize the color black."[37] As I mentioned in the discussion of the raven in chapter 2, this is a blatant case of orientalism, implying that lighter colors of hair are normative, unmarked, and expected, in contrast to black hair, which is unexpected and thus warrants explanation. The color black in this view pertains to the unusual and strange. What's more, some commentators associate the raven's black plumage with even stranger forces, like Keel, who asserts that "the black raven belongs to the realm of the hairy goat-spirits and the wild demons (Isa. 34:11; Zeph. 2:14)," in contrast to the "purest and most cultured" gold that describes the man's head earlier in 5:11.[38] Likewise, Gianni Barbiero observes that "in the metaphor used ('black as the raven') there is also a demonic element. The raven is an unclean animal (Lev 11:15); it belongs to the world of the demons (cf. Isa 34:11; Zeph 2:14) who are incarnated in the hairy goats of the desert (Song 5:2f)."[39] For these writers the raven's uncleanness and blackness paired with references to wilderness animals like owls and wild goats casts the bird in a sinister light. These associations with the demonic give the man's hair a "wild and unruly character," one that is dangerous but perhaps also alluring.[40]

In these various interpretations of the man's raven-black hair, we see two paths emerge. Some see the darkness of the raven's feathers as a positive sign of health and vitality, an indication of the man's youthful vigor in his sexual prime, a desirable trait

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[37] Ginsburg, *The Song of Songs*, 168; Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 185.

[38] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 199.

[39] Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 289.

[40] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 199.

from the woman's perspective. But others, like Keel and Barbiero above, fit the raven into a larger symbolic and supernatural scheme that involves both the raven in 5:11 and the dove in the next verse. As they read of the raven, both Keel and Barbiero think of demons and their ilk, with their mysterious, uncanny, and dangerous associations; as they read of the dove, they think of the love goddess and her associations of sensuality and romance. Barbiero puts the contrast like this: "the symbolic aspect (demonic-divine) is associated with the visual (black-white)."[41] As in Gregory of Nyssa's form of anagogical interpretation, they leap upward to find meaning in the supernatural (or downward in the case of the raven); instead of a horizontal reading of these avian animals alongside human animals, they take recourse to a vertical reading with a preordained arrangement—the dark, mysterious, demonic, and black in contrast to the bright, loving, divine, and white. This a priori symbolic structure of black versus white means for them it must be the white dove and not the more colorful pigeon. This unfortunate black/white structure constitutes another line drawn, another division erected, this time not within one species but between two opposite poles.

Uniting the Song's Lovers

Lines divide one species from another, as the dove in its white splendor is distinguished from the black raven, and lines divide the members of Columbidae internally as the white dove is distinguished from the blue-grey pigeon. But just as curious as these lines that separate one from another are the lines that unite disparate parties on a single side.

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[41] Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 290.

Humans may culturally construct their avian categories in such a way as to partition one bird from another, or even the same species from itself, but the human poet of the Song also employs bird imagery to draw the two lovers together and to find common ground between bird and human.

Notably, the two lovers both use some of the same sorts of imagery to describe each other. For instance, the man imagines the woman's eyes as doves in Song 1:15 and 4:1, and the woman in turn casts his eyes as doves as well in 5:12. On this similarity, Jill Munro notes, "The use of the same basic imagery […] discloses how very deeply the two protagonists love each other; they describe each other using the same language and hence convince the reader that they are not two but one."[42] Here, the dove becomes the factor that unites the two lovers. By means of this nonhuman animal, they are drawn together, nullifying the division between them as "they are not two but one." This bird is a bridge connecting them and highlighting their desire for one another, focusing on each one's entrancing eyes. Likewise, nonhumans link the lovers together in their descriptions of one another's hair. The woman says the man's hair is black like a raven's feathers (5:11), and the man compares the woman's hair to that of goats (4:1; 7:6), which commentators may take as meaning it is "black and wavy."[43] Once again, the features of other creatures illustrate the parallels that the lovers find desirable in one another. Other biblical texts may draw a strict line between goats and birds or between doves and ravens specifically, and modern cultural sensibilities may draw a line internally between the dove and the

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[42] Jill M. Munro, *Spikenard and Saffron: The Imagery of the Song of Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 203 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 90.

[43] Exum, *Song of Songs*, 204.

pigeon, but the use of these animals in the Song is not to draw lines but to unite the two lovers.

The doves also unite the lovers in their desire to connect across distance. The man refers to the woman as “my dove in the cleft of the rock” (יוֹנָתִי בְּחַגְוֵי הַסֶּלַע) in 2:14, which many scholars read as an expression of her inaccessibility.[44] Likewise in 4:1, the woman’s veil obscures her dovelike eyes: “The dove is bashful and hides in inaccessible places. So too the eyes of the Shulammite hide behind her veil, a quality that adds to their fascination.”[45] As a dove, she demonstrates “elusiveness, through which she probably plays hard to get.”[46] But multiple times in the Song, the lovers strive to cross the distances that separate them by calling to one another or seeking one another out (e.g., 4:8; 5:6; 6:1), and the winged dove, while at times inaccessible, possesses the means to close this gap. Of this dove imagery, Benjamin Segal wonders, “Is the image shared because doves transcend distance, the separation they wish to overcome?”[47] A number of commentators point out the use of doves as messenger symbols in the ancient Near Eastern background of the Song, carrying meaning across distances.[48] Ellen Davis notes,

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[44] Karl Budde, *Die fünf Megillot (Das Hohelied, Das Buch Ruth, Die Klagelieder, Der Prediger, Das Buch Esther)*, Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum Alten Testament 17 (Leipzig: Mohr Siebeck, 1898), 11; Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs*, ed. S. Dean McBride, Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvb936wk, 141; Garrett, “Song of Songs,” 394; Exum, *Song of Songs*, 128.

[45] Fox, *The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, 129.

[46] Danilo Verde, “Dove Metaphors in the Song of Songs: Between Cultural Conventions and Poetic Creativity,” in *Human Interaction with the Natural World in Wisdom Literature and Beyond: Essays in Honour of Tova L. Forti*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Katharine J. Dell, and David A. Glatt-Gilad, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 720 (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 138.

[47] Benjamin J. Segal, *The Song of Songs: A Woman in Love* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2009), 17–18.

[48] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 103; Bergant, *The Song of Songs*, 22, 30; Barbiero, *Song of Songs*, 79.

"Doves were the messenger birds of the powerful love goddess Ishtar (the Eastern counterpart to the Greek Aphrodite). […] Here the goddess's doves are transmuted into animated human eyes that convey messages of love."[49] As a result of this context, for Keel, casting the woman's eyes as doves produces a situation in which "one can see the doves only as messengers of love. Thus the sentence would mean: 'Your glances are messengers of love!'"[50] The dove, then, serves not only as an indication of the woman's inaccessibility but also the ability to transcend that same inaccessibility.[51]

The choice of the dove in particular for this poem's lovers is also significant because of how single-heartedly they are devoted to one another. Multiple commentators point out that the actual bird itself generally mates for life, and it is this monogamous quality that the lovers apply to themselves in their use of dove imagery. Ayo, for instance, says, "Rock-doves are monogamous lovebirds," and he sees their romantic proclamations as "a delightful verbal dance like the aerial display of mating doves."[52] The pair's playful parley finds parallels beyond the human world. Similarly, Segal observes, "The dove has only one mate, with an implied parallelism—'you are beautiful/ you are my darling/ you are beautiful/ you are mine alone.'"[53] Like a couple of Columbidae, the lovers' relationship is unique and exclusive. Indeed, multiple times in the Song the humans express a possessiveness over one another. The woman, for her part,

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[49] Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 247.

[50] Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 69–71.

[51] One might also think the role of homing pigeons as messengers. Though unattested in ancient Palestine, they do appear in Greece in the fifth century BCE (Firmage, "Zoology (Fauna)," 6:1145).

[52] Ayo, *Sacred Marriage*, 120.

[53] Segal, *The Song of Songs*, 17–18.

sees a mutuality in their rapport, each belonging to the other: “I am my beloved’s, and he is mine—the one who grazes among the lilies” (אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי הָרֹעֶה בַּשּׁוֹשַׁנִּים, 6:3). She recalls previous goat and sheep imagery to show their special connection. In addition, the man says of her, “Only she is my dove” (אַחַת הִיא יוֹנָתִי, 6:9), using dove imagery once again, potentially assuming the reader’s knowledge of doves’ typical monogamous behavior. The feeding habits and sexual behaviors stand in for the lovers’ faithfulness to one another.

The use of animal imagery to illustrate their virtuous devotion to one another is perhaps striking. Sometimes the literature of the Hebrew Bible turns to nonhuman animals to find moral virtues or admirable traits (e.g. Prov 6:6–8; 30:24–31), so relying on a background of dove fidelity is not completely unexpected. However, what is significant here is how this imagery creates a boundary that does not align neatly with the lines dividing the species. Daniel Lys, in his commentary, sees the Song proclaiming the virtue of “l’amour humain en monogamie (cf. l’opposition de l’unique au harem, 6, 8–9),” that is, “human love in monogamy,” in contrast to the profligate love of the harem as in Song 6:8.[54] But if the lovers’ monogamous devotion to one another is illustrated through dove imagery, to what extent is this love “human”? Lys draws a line between a bonded pair on one hand and the immoral multiplicity of the harem on the other, and this line does not follow the contours of the line between species. It is not, for instance, that human love is laudable and animal love is damnable—rather, the unions of two that he values are a feature that cross species lines, a feature that can be shared by both humans

[54] Lys, *Le plus beau chant de la création*, 55.

and doves. As in Stone’s reading of the Exodus narrative, a line may divide human from human while simultaneously uniting certain humans with other animals.

Conclusion

In the Song, in the Hebrew Bible at large, and in contemporary English parlance, lines in and around birds proliferate. Ravens and doves differ to the ancient human writers on account of their edibility and therefore their suitability for sacrifice, and humans use the dove to draw lines between human devotees of differing social classes. The raven in its dark color is identified as distinct from the dove in its brilliant white, and doves themselves are internally divided as pure wild dove in contrast to grey feral pigeon. Lines within and lines without.

For this dissertation, however, the lines that matter most are those that sequester the lovers from the rest of humanity and draw them together, uniting them in avian imagery. Not everyone can be called “my dove”—this is a title reserved by the man only for his woman, separating her from everyone else. Not everyone can “stand out from ten thousand” (דָּגוּל מֵרְבָבָה, 5:10), with his raven-dark hair and milky dove-eyes—only the woman’s beloved deserves these compliments. The lovers identify each other as wholly unique among all people with bird language, like the dove identifying its singular mate for life. In addition, they draw themselves together, using similar ornithological descriptions for each other, admiring the avian qualities in their partner, and they recall birds’ ability to close wide distances to unite them. These lines cross even species boundaries, as in Stone’s reading of Exodus, connecting human and bird.

The lovers and their bird descriptors are not so different, in their beauty for one another and in their monogamous sexual desire, and the line between human and

nonhuman begins to blur here. Robert Miller says of the wildlife metaphors in the woman's waṣf in Song 5, "Such metaphors applied to a human being remind us that we are animals."[55] The Song can thus be interpreted in ways that show the similarities of animals of both human and nonhuman varieties. This is not a Song about humans alone but rather about humans as one of the world's many animals, all sharing in the experience of sexuality.

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[55] Robert D. Miller II, *Finding Beauty in the Bible: An Aesthetic Commentary on the Song of Songs*, McMaster Biblical Studies Series 11 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023), 76.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

In a chapter about the effect of the Song of Songs on its readers, David J. A. Clines observes, "It is hard for a reader of this book, I mean a serious and committed reader, a well-wishing and appreciative reader, to worry at the same time about global warming or the fate of whales."[1] The Song is far too narrowly focused on the seductive interplay of the lovers for readers to worry about other external issues, Clines says. Now of course there is no explicit mention of whales in the Song, but still I wonder in response, why need this be? Why would our "serious and committed" attention to the text draw us away from the concerns of the greater-than-human world? Why need the "well-wishing and appreciative reader" of the Song set aside concerns other than the romance of the poem's lovers? I suspect that Clines may be pre- and overdetermining the outcome of a contemporary reader's encounter with the Song. When read from a *furmeneutical* perspective, in contrast, we might find that the Song *should* turn us to the "fate of the whales"—or at least to the fates of the creatures that populate its pages.

This dissertation began with a quotation from this same essay by Clines, in which he asserts of the Song that there is "one thing that it is self-evidently about: human sexual love."[2] I have aimed here to show, however, that it is worth asking whether human

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[1] David J. A. Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?", in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 201 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 114.

[2] Clines, "Why Is There a Song of Songs, and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?", 110.

sexuality is truly what the Song is "about"—and whether it could be "about" far more. As we have seen, a menagerie of animal sexualities permeates the Song, with that of humans being only one. Nonhuman animals prance and flutter, graze and lurk, see and sing throughout the Song. And these animal appearances are not the dispassionate descriptions of a biology journal or the narrative depictions of a nature documentary but rather the comparisons made by lovers entranced by the animal qualities they see in the human other. The woman imagines the man as an athletic gazelle, leaping and displaying its defined musculature as it makes its approach to gaze at her through the window. The man imagines his lover as a mare that grabs the military advantage by overpowering the enemy's stallions with her entrancing pheromones. The couple imagines one another as predators that may ravage or dominate them. They confess their devotion to one another a they both share in the imagery of the monogamous dove. The verses of the Song freely flow with fauna—the book is "about" so much more than human sexuality.

Throughout these explorations of creaturely poetry, I have argued two points about the animal imagery of the Song. First, the subject of the Song is not just *human* sexuality—in fact, the book can show how sexuality is an aspect of experience that is common to a number of different creatures. As Dalí's deer gazes through the window at the naked woman (Figure 3 in chap. 3), it is not an innocent or disinterested stare but rather a lustful scene of ogling, complete with drool dripping from his open maw. It is not a simple deer in its serene beauty that turns the woman on but rather its yearning gaze and its desire to "graze" on her. Similarly, 1:9's estrous mare emanates sexual power as she disrupts the chariots of the enemy. Some commentators imagine 2:15's foxes to have snouts not unlike a penis, plunging into the dirt and penetrating it to find tasty fruit. And

it is the dove's sexual practice of maintaining only a single mate in life that becomes the basis of comparison for a number of readers. The Song is replete with animal sexuality—lascivious gazes, hormonal desires, and mating customs that show just how alike we humans are to our nonhuman kin. Sexuality has never been a humans-only affair. To repeat Roland Boer's observation, "if the Song is indeed 'about' sex in some way, then that sex can hardly be restricted to human beings."[3] The Song is not "about" human sexuality but rather shows how human romance is merely one white-capped wave in the vast ocean of animal sexuality.

Second, I have argued that the repeated use of animal imagery for and by the lovers of the Song has the effect of blurring the line between human and nonhuman animals. When the woman admires what is gazelle-like in the man, does she also imagine herself as a gazelle, or does she imagine a love that crosses species boundaries? When she searches for her man in 1:7–8, are they both shepherds? is she the shepherd and he the sheep? or vice versa? When the man seeks the woman among the cats of the mountains (4:8), should she escape the danger those predators represent or is she herself part of the allure of that danger? When the lovers compliment each other's eyes in avian language, and when the man refers to the woman as "my dove" (2:14; 5:2; 6:9), where does the human end and the bird begin? On metaphors like these, Max Black famously says, "If to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would."[4] In these animal

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[3] Roland Boer, "A Fleshly Reading: Masochism, Ecocriticism, and the Song of Songs," in *The Earthly Nature of the Bible: Fleshly Readings of Sex, Masculinity, and Carnality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 31.

[4] Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

comparisons, the lines between fur, feather, and flesh become fuzzy. These moments when the species line is blurry can raise question about the hierarchies we too often assume between human and nonhuman animals. The lovers value what is animal-like in one another and express their erotic desire in animal terms, to the extent that it is frequently unclear whether the poetic image intended is human or nonhuman or both at once. If each lover sees so much worth in the animal nature of their partner, perhaps readers might also get a glimpse of the intrinsic worth of those animals in and of themselves. As the division between human and nonhuman becomes more and more porous, those species hierarchies also become all the more unstable.

As a result of these two features of the Song—a presentation of sexuality as a shared human/animal phenomenon and a presentation of the human/animal boundary as shifting and unclear—this "furmeneutical" reading of the book can raise some ethical questions for readers today. To be clear, the Song does not lay out an ethical program or transmit sagacious instruction about how to live in the world and relate to its inhabitants. Some of its imagery is founded in the inequality of domestication, in the fear of the predator, or in unconscious assumptions about the black demonic raven versus the pure white dove (at least for some commentators). Sometimes these disparities between human and nonhuman animals or between different species of animal may align with or against other disparities, like gender inequality. The Song does not depict an Eden full of equal representation and devoid of hierarchies. But what it does do is show how humans can recognize and even celebrate the valuable qualities of the nonhuman denizens of our

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University Press, 1962), 44.

world. Deer are beautiful, horses are sexy, foxes are seductive, and doves are lively, just as the lovers are all of these things. As what is perhaps "the most 'ecological' book in the Bible,"[5] the Song can prompt us to ask ethical questions about our nonhuman neighbors. If our romantic partner is worthy of love and life, why not also the nonhuman animals to which we can compare them? If we want the best for our sheeplike lover, why would we not also consider what is best for sheep themselves? Why not consider "the fate of whales"?

A full treatment of animal ethics and the Hebrew Bible is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I have aimed to provide an incitement to thought in this direction. As Viviers states, the Song shows us that "nature is indeed good to think by!"[6] This book that is ostensibly "about" human sexuality can be interpreted in ways that reveal so much more about humanity and animality both, and perhaps our world might be a little more just and equitable if readers took more time to think by nature. This dissertation is not the final word on animals in the Song of Songs but rather the beginning of an encounter between humans and animals as sexual subjects. I have argued that the lovers of this book show how animal they really are, and in so doing, we expose ourselves to the question of how we may relate to animals. Let us then begin to think, for as Derrida says, "The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there."[7]

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[5] Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 265.

[6] Hendrik Viviers, "Gardens as 'Partners' in Contemplation: Reading the Stories of the First Eden (Genesis 2–3) and a Restored Eden (Song of Songs) through the Lens of Attention Restoration Theory," *Journal for Semitics* 25 (2017): 347–70, https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/2542, here 368.

[7] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 29.

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