

# The bride as a 'locked garden': An eco-sustainability retrieval of nature metaphor in Song of Songs 4:12–15

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Song 4:12–15 depicts the body of the bride as a 'locked garden' filled with fruits, exotic and medicinal plants and abundant freshwater. These luxuries are said to be plentiful and appealing but carry with them the threat of spoiling. In this way, the garden is ready for enjoyment, but forbidden (locked) at the same time. The geo-metaphor of the bride fits perfectly with the ancient belief of *Mother Earth* and resists the dominion drive of the Anthropocene. Dominance is alien to Canticles. The Book pledges that we can rediscover the lost paradise of Genesis 2 through love and partnership, not dominion. This article investigates which assumptions about nature are reflected in the author's use of nature metaphors to describe the sensual body of the bride. It makes use of insights of ecological sustainability, the principle of intrinsic worth from the six eco-justice principles of the Earth Bible Project and elements of historical-critical approaches to retrieve the ecological significance of Song 4:12–15.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article explores whether the insights of eco-sustainability can be fruitfully used to retrieve ecological wisdom from the metaphor of Song 4 depicting the bride as a locked garden. It involves the disciplines of biblical exegesis, elements of ecological hermeneutics and insights from sustainability theories.

**Keywords:** Garden of Eden; eco-theology; ecological hermeneutics; eco-sustainability; Anthropocene; metaphor.

## Introduction

Song of Songs open in 1:2 with the voice of the woman ('Let him kiss me') while her presence and voices dominate the speeches of the book. She vigorously seeks her lover (1:7), and 'held him' and 'would not let him go' until 'bringing him' into the house of her mother (3:4; 8:1–2). This woman seems to be both vulnerable and self-assured (3:1–4; 5:7) (Van der Merwe 2016:583). The woman's anonymity, the lack of references to a place and time and the poems' use of eco-metaphors, similes, and metonymies<sup>1</sup> to describe the woman provide the reader with a freedom of reflection and focus.

Song 4 starts with the so-called *Wasf*.<sup>2</sup> It is a *Bewunderungslied für die Frau* (Can 4:1–7) (Bühlmann 1997:51), describing the physical beauty of the bride using flora and fauna images. Verse 7 concludes 'you are all together beautiful, my bride; there is no blemish in you'. The number of the parts of the body are seven, a symbol of perfection, which somehow linked with Genesis 1:31. The transition between body's parts (vv. 2–6) to the person (the woman) means that it is the woman, not her body, who is perfect. The expression וְיָמִים אֵין בָּךְ [in you there is no blemish] in verse 7 comes closer to God's evaluation of the *body of his creation* in Genesis 1:31: 'God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good'. The wonder before the woman has a similar, almost *sacral* significance as that before nature (creation).

However, verse 8 adds a kind of *Unerreichbarkeit* or sacredness of the beloved who is a kind of 'goddess' living in the mountain surrounded by lion's dens and leopards. The description is like the Gilgamesh epic in which the Cedar Mountain is the living place of the goddess Ishtar (Bühlmann 1997:56). The combination of Mountain, lions' dens and leopards epitomise the dignity and secured access, unless the beloved decides herself to descend towards the man.

1.A metonymy associates things; a metaphor substitutes things while the simile (simile) looks for similarities.

2.A *Wasf* is an Arabic word that means description. It is a 'genre of poetry known from ancient and more modern times alike that describes the physical charms of a loved one' (Dobbs-Allopp 2005:262).

That's why from verse 12, the beloved is depicted as a locked garden and a sealed fountain of living water (v. 15): the first (garden) offers fruit and spices (vv. 13–14), while the second gives life-giving water (v. 15), but both are locked. The garden is ready for enjoyment but forbidden (locked) at the same time. There is a tension between desire and distance. The description of this garden is more in line with Kohelet 2:4–6 and oriental kings' gardens than a normal Israelite' garden (Koh 2006:71–81).

The question is which assumptions about or attitudes towards Nature/Earth are reflected in the author's use of nature imagery to describe the Beloved? The answer to this question will touch on the perceptions the author might have about the *value* or the *intrinsic worth* of nature/Earth. Using elements of socio-historical criticism and ecological hermeneutics, it is found that Song of Songs 4 is the inversion of the narrative of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2–3. The primacy of man of Genesis 2–3 is reinterpreted as that of the woman who is identified with the land (garden). She does not dominate *per se* but invites the absent man to enter the garden. Dominance is alien to the Song. The Book pledges that we can rediscover the lost paradise of Genesis 2 through love and partnership, not dominion.

Song 4 provides us with a means of understanding the author's appreciation of the value of Nature identified with the beloved woman as a *partner* as 'if through the experience of love, one enters into contact with the forces of life, with the mysteries of the earth' (Barbiero 2011:176). In this way, the woman of Song 4 is almost forgotten in the geo-description of the aromatic and exotic traits of the garden. The peculiarity of the metaphor lies in the style of comparison, or better, the absence of comparison in the sense that the garden replaces the bride (Murphy 1990:160).

This has attracted our attention towards an ecological reading of the metaphor of Songs 4. The insistence that the garden is only a sexual euphemism ignores the polysemantic aspect of poetry. In other words, the image of the garden is as much about sexuality as about nature in Eden-like world. In this way, the text can serve as a locus for ecological reflection. Songs 4:12–15 presents Nature as a 'primordial home', the paradise filled with all kinds of exotic fruits, spices, flowers and an abundance of life-giving water. The lover celebrates her as the symbol of all life (Landy 1983:247).

Though the poet's agenda is not about ecology, the use of nature as a vehicle of man and woman's love-play hints at the author's ecological worldview. The *eco-delight* runs through the book as a vehicle, without which the main thrust of the book would be meaningless. The eco-delight description derives from the subversive aspect of the book itself in which the woman/nature is not the submissive character of the lost Eden of Genesis 3:16 but a partner and subject of delight. The interaction between the lovers epitomises their reciprocal interaction with nature to the point that even the *raven* (פֶּעֶרֶב) (an unclean animal, Gn 8:7) is

cleansed and used as a simile to describe the beauty of the beloved (Viviers 2001:144).

In contrast to Cartesian dualism exorcising mind from nature, the Song of Songs celebrates nature as both the Beloved and the ideal domain of intimacy. Landy describes the Song's principal metaphor as a 'rural retreat' (Landy 1983:31). This seems to be a criticism of the growing city culture in Hellenistic times when the Song was probably written, depicting pastoral life as the ideal. In the Hellenistic times, cities became more and more associated with rebellion (Dn 4:30), consumerism, dehumanised and unsustainable environment (Carroll 2010:75). That is why the Bible concludes with a sanctified urban setting at harmony with nature (Rv 21–22), a world, which is free of pain and suffering.

An ecological reading of Song 4 is not therefore a cherry-picking interpretative attempt. In fact, meaning arises from the confrontation between the worlds *behind*, *within* and *in front* of the text (Gadamer 2004). The fusion of these three worlds (horizons) represents the environment in which meaning is created. Hence, this paper focuses on retrieving the eco-sustainability insights of the Eden-like elements used in the text as the metaphor for the body of the woman and a home for love intimacy.

## Eco-sustainability and ecological hermeneutics

In general, sustainability or sustainable development is defined as 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland 1987). Economic (wealth), ecological (nature) and social (people and society/culture) are three interwoven aspects of sustainable development (Nilashi et al. 2019:1). Ecological sustainability implies then the use of natural resources (land, water etc.) to sustain production/wealth without undermining environmental balance, and ideally without loss of native biodiversity (Aarts 1999:89).

It is with this ideal in mind that we are reading the metaphor of Song 4:12–15. The idea is to see how the author was led by eco-sustainability insights in his or her depiction of the bride as an appealing but locked garden and sealed but flowing fountain. In this way, in addition to the hermeneutics of suspicion and retrieval, the principle of intrinsic worth of the Earth Bible Project will be used in the analysis.

By intrinsic worth, the project means that 'the universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value' (Habel 2008:2). With regard to elements of suspicion, we suspect that Song 4 is always understood from anthropocentric perspectives in which non-human subjects of the text are generally overlooked. Scholars are busy commenting about human love and ignore the significance of the vehicle used to convey them.

By hermeneutics of retrieval, this study will involve features that can enable the recovery of insights of *intrinsic value* of Earth from the metaphorical languages of Song 4:12–15. This reading mindset has the potential to unearth explicit or implicit significance of non-human beings of the text. In Song 4, human love is stated through nature-related metaphors reflecting great ecological insights. Through the hermeneutic of retrieval of the metaphor, the reader shows how the notion of eco-sustainability is highly conveyed in Song 4:12–15. The reader attempts to show whether the nature metaphor occurring in this text that seems not concerned with environmental matters can fruitfully be read from an ecological perspective. It is assumed that the metaphor might have been informed by a certain ecological worldview of the author.

## Metaphor theory

The book of Song of Songs is feminine at heart: it is the tale of a woman, telling her story, her plight, her yearnings, her strengths and her frailty, her oppression and fight to freedom (McMonagle 1995:3). This story is told through a few metaphors drawn from Nature. A metaphor selects, highlights, suppresses and organises features (tenor) of the main subject (referent) by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject (vehicle) (Agnon 2019:61).

A metaphor has three elements: vehicle, referent, and tenor. The tenor links the vehicle and the referent. In Song of Songs, most of the time an element of nature serves as the vehicle for love or the lover (the referent), which is linked to the vehicle through the tenor. The tenor concerns elements of the vehicle (nature) that invite particular understandings of the referent (erotic love). The Earth bible principle of the intrinsic worth of nature is used in the analyses (The Earth Bible Team 2000). The idea is to determine whether Nature, understood as having intrinsic value, is respected by the 'root metaphor' in Song 4:12–15 (4:12–5:1).

A root metaphor is the underlying worldview or perception that shapes an individual or an author/writer's understanding of a situation. A root metaphor provides the reader with more possibilities for application and elaboration in proportion to a number of reciprocal aspects it shares with the thing or situation it describes (Holland 1992:185).

The woman as garden illustrates the reciprocity of the referent (the beloved/love) and nature. The beloved becomes a beautiful, delectable garden and the garden becomes a desirable woman. These metaphorisations and personifications denote our oneness with nature: humans and Nature blend, the one mirroring the other (Viviers 2001:149). Humans and Nature belong together.

By experiencing the one (woman's body) you sense the other (garden/nature). Nature is in the mind of the author,

not something to dominate (as in Gn 3), but to love. At his time, Alexander von Humboldt observed what he called the *Zauber der Natur* (mysteries of nature) and concluded that the researcher should not only focus on analysing and rationalising nature as an object of investigation, but that *die Natur müsse erlebt und gefühlt werden*<sup>3</sup> (Wulf 2015:22). In fact, Von Humboldt lived in the Romantic era (1750–1850) emphasising intense emotion and idealisation of nature in literature and art as a reaction to the industrial Revolution and rationalisation of Nature (Stevens 2004:11). The same conception dominated the love and nature metaphor in the Song.

## Brief overview of approaches of Song 4:12–5:1

This overview contains material on ecological readings of the book of Song of Songs. It offers four categories that are representative, but not comprehensive interpretations. These are eco-feminist, Marxist, deep ecology and eco-justice readings of Song of Songs.

### Eco-feminist reading (Carol Fontaine)

According to Fontaine (2001:128), Song of Songs, and Song 4:12–15 in particular, invites women to find themselves reflected as beloved rather than bred, partnered rather than patronised, valued rather than vilified. The curse-related hierarchy is revoked: man and woman are equal partners. Their speeches denote 'interaction . . . , sharing and mutuality' (Dobbs-Allopp 2005:270). The beloved is a more active and vocal partner contrary to the submissive wife of Genesis 3:20 (Landy 1983:250).

Fontaine observes whether the same ideas can be said on the text when the reader would place Earth (instead of women) in the centre of the interpretations. The dominant nature (as opposed to social) imagery of the Song would mean more than the background upon which the lovers lean back (Fontaine 2001:128). Song of Songs is a valuable resource for those trying to imagine new power relations between people and the earth.

Therefore, the author depicts Earth in Song of Songs as a metaphor for the loved one, and a sign of power. In reference to Song 4:12–5:1, Fontaine describes Earth as a metaphor for the loved one in the sense that:

- Nature imagery depicts both the male and female lover (not only the female lover).
- Nevertheless, the male lover is depicted as wild, having freedom of movement, and feeding from the woman (5:1); the female lover is portrayed as more static (garden, well, locked, sealed), and bringing forth plants and food (4:12–15). She is acted upon.
- These gendered distinctions should not be overdrawn. Neither sex totally monopolises any one domain. Nature appears largely without conflicts.

<sup>3</sup>Nature should be experienced and felt.

This applies to all creatures, including male and female humans. A restoration of sorts deliberately reverses the curses of Eden and a kind of a 'peaceable kingdom' is opened wide to invite humanity's participation.

### Marxist reading (Roland Boer)

Boer (2009:3) offers a Marxist reading of Song of Songs and he treats the metaphors in Song of Songs in a literal way. In fact, a metaphor has three elements: the vehicle, referent, and tenor. The tenor links the vehicle and the referent. In Song of Songs, most of the time an element of nature serves as the vehicle. Erotic love is the referent, which is linked to the vehicle through the tenor. The tenor concerns elements of the vehicle (nature) that invite particular understandings of the referent (erotic love).

Boer proposes that we cut the link between the vehicle and the referent (by showing no interest in the tenor), which results in the liberation of the vehicle (nature) from the idea of bodily (erotic) love. By implication it means that the vehicle (nature) be treated literally (according to Boer) – reading Song of Songs as if it is about nature. Hence, the title of his article 'Keeping it literal: The economy of the Song of Songs'.

With reference to Song 2:11–12 Boer (2009:4) claims that 'there is nothing about the nature images here suggesting that they may refer intrinsically to human love'. A Marxist reading picks up the point that 'nature' is a construct, not merely at the hands of language, but also at the hands of social and economic formations. For him, Song of Songs is a collection of images that constructs a distinct natural world in its own *bodily* aspect. This article does not with Boer on his proposal of analysing Song of Songs as if it was only about nature.

### Deep ecology: Body as mystical embodiment of the land

Deep ecologists purport that the Song concerns the mystical union with nature through the union of lovers: it is the story of two lovers, and the story of their love for the Earth (Deep-Ecology 2005). Several times, this article makes reference to the passage on the woman as garden in Song of Songs 4:12–5:1:

Drawing inspiration from nature, they [*lovers*] invent a metaphorical language or express their delight in each other's beauty, grace, and vigour. In this process, they become poetic embodiments of the land and its life.

But there is more to the metaphor in the ability of these two lovers to flow magically from shape to shape. Their fluidity arises from the author's sense of connectedness with the web of life. The Song is an articulation of the primordial religion of love and wonder, and *the experience of mystical union*.

In this sense, Song 4:12–5:1 would be seen to be about bridal mysticism. It would be a kind of a mystical union in which human Eros leads to mystical love (wedding) of earth (cf. Mother Earth myth). In other words, Deep love for another has the potential to lead us into the most profound

communion with nature and its source of life. Also the love for the body would lead to the love of nature.

I argue that the Song of Songs, which was set in its final form some 300 years before the birth of Christ, preserves elements that are much older – rooted in a time when our sacred role in the renewal of life was thought to be the very heart of religion. Animated with Nature's passion for the renewal of life, the bride (Julieta) draws her Romeo more deeply into the story of the Earth (Can 4:16).

### Ecojustice reading

Viviers offers an ecojustice reading that exemplifies an approach proposed by Norman Habel through The Earth Bible project. Viviers reads Song of Songs through the lens of three of the six ecojustice principles suggested by Habel, namely 'the celebrative voice of Earth and its inhabitants, the interconnectedness of the Earth community, and Nature's intrinsic worth' (Viviers 2001:144).

Viviers reads the Song as the love-play between man and woman. He asserts that Song of Songs unquestionably is subversive literature. It subverts patriarchy and the moral and religious mores of its time (4th or 3rd century BCE). Viviers also emphasises the mystical aspect of nature as portrayed in Song of Songs. He comes close to a deep ecology reading of the text. Reference is made to Song 4:12–5:1 in his sections on Earth as home, and the interconnectedness of humans and nature:

Earth as home:

- The gardens, the pastures and the peaceful villages are a haven for the intimacy of the two lovers (1:7–8; 2:16; 4:12–5:1; 6:2–3, 11–12; 7:11–13).
- We are reminded of the appearance of first life as we experience the eternal cycle of new life springing forth from Earth. This is (again) illustrated in the metaphor of the woman as garden, as *pardes* (4:12–5:1).
- The Earth community in the Song becomes a far better 'eden' than the first one in Genesis: perfect harmony between the genders; humans, plants and animals are kin. Love is the key which unlocks life.

Interconnectedness of humans and nature:

- The woman as garden illustrates the reciprocity of metaphorisation and personification. Woman becomes beautiful, delectable garden and garden becomes desirable woman. By experiencing the one you sense the other.

Viviers concludes that the way in which humans identify with their world does not only come to the fore in their 'linguaging' of it, but markedly also in what they 'do' with it.

This article links up with insights from Deep ecology and the ecojustice reading. The metaphor used in Song 4:12–15 creates a context in which the ecological meaning is retrieved.

## Literary and structural matters

### The literary position of Song 4:12–15 in the book

There are many propositions of the structural outline of the book of Song of Songs, and here is not the place to argue for/against any specific structural model. The book is either presented in an abundance of distinct, independent poems, or it can be united as a single grand poetic structure. However, it is generally agreed that dialogue is the pattern that determines the poetic development of the book. Mostly, Song 1:2–2:7 and 8:3/5–14 are seen as *inclusio* while the centre of the book is thought to be somewhere in Song 4:16–5:1 (Exum 2005:49) or 3:6–5:1 (Dorsey 1999:212).

This article is in line with the structural insights in which Song 4:12–15 is part of the literary unit (Can 3:6–5:1). However, within the structure of Song 3:6–5:1 itself, Song 4:12–15 is part of the peak or the finality of the unit, the union of the lovers in Song 4:12–5:1 (Dorsey 1999:206). This unit contains three parts: the man's admiration of the beloved woman as a fruitful, watered and locked garden (4:12–15), the woman's invitation to her man to *come* and enjoy her garden's fruits (4:16) before ending with her man's approval of the invitation (5:1ab) (Exum 2005:41).

Song 3:6–5:1 contains an *intermezzo* (3:6–11) and the songs of the man (4:1–5:1). The man's speech in Song 4:1–5:1 consists of two metaphoric *Wasfs* describing his lover's body. A *Waf* is an Arabic word for description. It is a 'genre of poetry known from ancient and more modern times alike that describes the physical charms of a loved one' (Dobbs-Allopp 2005:262). The first song (4:1–7) is mostly a simile while the second (4:8–5:1) is a metaphor saying that the woman is a garden of exotic plants and abundant waters.

The three units of Song 4:8–5:1 (4:7–11; 4:12–16 & 5:1) are deeply affected by the verb 'to come' (בוא) at its *inclusio* (4:8 & 5:1). This *movement towards* was introduced at the end of the preceding song (4:6) in which the beloved man expresses the desire 'to go' (הלך) to the woman/nature, whose consent (4:16) is essential to let the man *come in* the locked garden of Song 4:12–15.

Therefore, Song 4:12–15 is part of the centre and the culmination of Song 3:6–5:1. While it shares direct affinities with the progressive 'coming nearer' of the two lovers from Song 2 until their union in Song 5:1, it also sets up limits to be aware of in the 'enclosed garden'.

The translation and structure of the text is presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

### Translation and structure of Song 4:12–15

This translation is derived from the New Revised Standard Version. Where I changed it, I will mention it in the text due to my ecological sensibility.

TABLE 1: Translation of Song 4:12–15.

Translation	Hebrew
<sup>12</sup> A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden† locked, a fountain sealed.	גֹּן נִעְלוֹ אָחִיזִי כַּלְהָ גֵל נִעְלוֹ מַעְיָן חֲתוּמִים:
<sup>13</sup> Your channel‡ is an orchard of Pomegranates with choicest fruit, henna with nard,	שְׂלֵתְךָ פְּרָדֵס רִמּוֹנִים עִם פְּרִי מִגְנֵימִים כַּפְרִים עִם-נָרְדִים:
<sup>14</sup> nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense, myrrh and aloes—	נָרְדִין וְכַרְפֻּם קַנְהָ וְקַמְזִיּוֹן עִם כָּל-עֵצֵי לְבוֹנָה מֵר וְאֶתְלֹת עִם כָּל-רֵאשֵׁי בְשָׂמִים:
<sup>15</sup> a fountain of the gardens,§ well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon	מַעְיָן גַּיְתִים בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים וְנוֹזְלִים מִרְלִבְנוֹן:

†, Following the Old Versions (LXX, Vulgate, Syriac), I prefer to read twice the words נִעְלוֹ [locked garden] in contrast to the MT proposition of reading here גֵּל נִעְלוֹ [spring locked]. The participle נִעְלוֹ in the second part of the verse can be connected to the blocking-up of a garden door (or gate), but it is less appropriate for the blocking of a spring (cf. the meaning of נִעְלוֹ in Can 5:5) (Barbiero 2011:219). In Song 5:5 and Judges 3:23, נִעְלוֹ points to something/object (door/gate) which is supposed to be opened/closed from within with a bolt.

‡, V. 13: the word שְׂלֵתְךָ is rendered as 'channel' or conduit from the root שלח [to send] with Nehemiah 3:15. Others prefer here 'your shoots' with reference to Isaiah 16:8.

§, The Masoretic Text has here the plural mayim ganin (fountain gardens) which can be rendered literally as 'fountain of gardens, a fountain that irrigates gardens.' We refer here the rendering of the Masoretic Text, the Syriac, Vulgate and certain manuscripts of the LXX instead of the one retained by the NRSV following the proposition of LXX8 proposing the singular kepuu. It is a plural of generalisation (cf. 6:2; 8:13).

Source: Barbiero, G., 2011, *Song of Songs: A close reading*, Brill, Boston, MA.

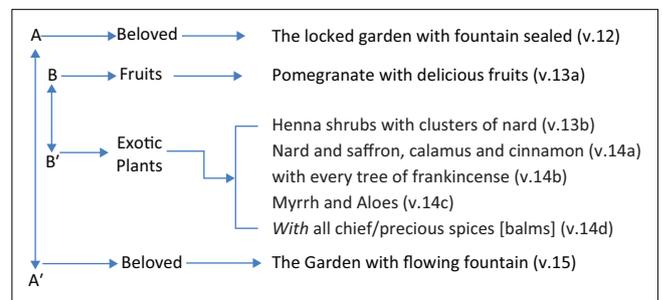


FIGURE 1: Structure of the text.

The strophe is framed by verses 12 and 15 in which the 'garden' (גֹּן) and the 'fountain' (מַעְיָן) are respectively stated to be locked and sealed (AA'), while the central part (vv. 13–14) enlists the valuable fruit and exotic plants of the garden (BB'). In all, verse 4 enlists 12 plants, a number which links up with the tribes of Israel, and thus identifying the woman with the promised land (Barbiero 2011:215).

The enclosed garden is depicted by four verbs, all participles referring to the *intrinsic worth* of the garden in the sense that enclosed/locked (נִעְלוֹ) (repeated twice in vv. 12a & 12b) and sealed (חֲתוּמִים) (v. 12b) embeds the idea of intrinsic measures of the protection of the garden. The last verb 'flowing' (נוֹזְלִים) water, verse 15c, points forward to the nourishment of the flora of the garden. There is no finite verb in verses 13–14; it is a list of fruits and spices of the enclosed garden.

Indeed, the whole chapter (Can 4) reflects the tension between having access to and being prevented from having access to something (e.g. Veil: vv. 1, 3; the origin of the woman in mountains with lions/leopards [4:8], the garden locked [vv. 12ff.]). Contrary to Proverbs 5:15–20 in which the value of the woman is considered from male perspective (as a well/cistern), to whom the enjoyment of love is reserved, in Song 4, love is not possible without the consent of the beloved the woman. Like Genesis 2–3, Song 4 reflects

the tension between what should be left untouched (what is forbidden) and what can be enjoyed.

## Retrieving ecological wisdom from Song 4:12–15

### Garden enclosed/locked (vv. 12, 15)

The woman is the garden and the garden is the woman. This illustrates the reciprocity of metaphorisation and personification. The identity of the Beloved is depicted very sensually in natural metaphors of exotic plants, spices, and springs of water. At the same time, the garden becomes a subject in its own right; nature is personified in the woman, nature is humanised/womanised (Landy 1983:104). The beloved woman becomes beautiful, attractive garden, and the garden becomes desirable woman, but locked and secured. By experiencing the one you sense the other (Viviers 2001:150).

The garden is locked (גָּן נֶעֱלָם) and fertile: she is delectable and desirable but secured and locked. The Hebrew word garden (גָּן) derives from the root גָּנַן [to close]. The term גָּן naturally contains the idea of 'being enclosed', which is intensified by the adjectives נֶעֱלָם [closed] with its fountain 'sealed' [סָתוּם]. The Hebrew נֶעֱלָם implies that the gate is opened *from within*: 'the male, even the husband, cannot enter without seeking her permission' (Barbiero 2011:219). Otherwise, the encounter is not love, but violence or rape.

The geo-description of the bride fits perfectly with the ancient belief of 'Mother Earth' that resists the dominion drive of the Anthropocene. The Akan people of Ghana say 'you must be prepared to do to the land/earth what you can do to your mother'. The Akan people consider *Asase* [land] as the femininity aspect of the creator God. That is why it is practically impossible to think of dominion of nature because nature/land is a mother, and a normal person can never imagine of dominating his or her mother (Boamah 2015).

The identification of the woman with the garden in Song 4 is a particular case of her identification with the land in the sense that attitudes towards women epitomise attitudes towards nature (Ruether 1992:50). The metaphor testifies at viewing nature as a subject, intrinsically valuable and partner.

Scholars do not hesitate to name modern disastrous anthropocentric encounters with nature as 'the rape of the earth' (Tucker 1997:4). In fact, human dominion in Genesis 1:28 is described by the verb כָּבַשׁ [to subdue], which might also mean *rape* (Neh 5:5). Unless the verb is read in relation to Genesis 1:1–2:4a, human-nature encounter might be understood simply as a despotic power over merely objects.

Contrary to the multiplication and dominion mandate of Genesis 1:28 to subdue (כָּבַשׁ), the Song lacks allusion to

procreation and dominion. The book presents human love as an end in itself (Lys 1968:52). In her *eco-bosadi*<sup>4</sup> reading of the Bible, Masenya argues that African Mothers and Mother Earth suffer a common abuse from the male drive to multiply children at all costs (Masenya 2001:122). And the more the population, the more the pressure on natural resources and pressure on the sustainability of the earth. Production at all costs hinders the sustainability of the planet.

Love as devotion, alterity, reciprocity and mutualism as expressed in Song 4, resists the commodification of the other (woman/nature). The world can be *saved* even by insight of a love story like the Song if we, humans, have 'eyes for Nature' as much as we have 'eyes only for each other' according to Song 4 (Viviers 2001:154).

### The promised land-like Garden (vv. 13–14)

The expression 'honey and milk' under the tongue of the Beloved (Can 4:11) links up with Exodus 3:17 about the Promised Land (Osherow 2006:306). This is confirmed with the expression פְּרִי תְּגֵימִים [delicious fruits], which, other than Song 4:13–14, only occurs in Deuteronomy 33:13–16 in relation to the wonders of the promised land. In other words, behind the garden of the Song, we can catch a glimpse not only of the Garden of Eden but also of the garden of the promised land.

According to Song of Songs, enjoying Nature (the promised land) is likened to enjoying each other and *vice versa*. The garden's expressions of Song 6:11–14 puts this even clearer in terms of losing oneself in the wonder and beauty of the garden. Writing from a bodily perspective, Leder (1990) uses the notion of *absorption* that:

When we become deeply absorbed, as in a natural landscape, it is as if we were swallowed into a larger body. At the same time this landscape is swallowed into our embodiment, transforming it from within. (p. 165)

Life on the promised land requires a balanced tension between enjoyment and abiding by given principles (Dt 8). The land vomits those who engage in unsustainability like the other nations (ungodly) (Lv 18:25). With this in mind, the metaphor presents the body of the bride as a sacred arena, which is appealing but also restricted. It reflects the tension between what should be left untouched (what is forbidden) and what can be enjoyed, similar to Genesis 2–3.

The readiness of the woman to give her love stems from the exotic plants and fruits. Verse 13 starts with the plural שְׁלֵחַי, which is a *hapax legomenon* in the Hebrew Bible deriving from the verb שלח [to send]. Barbiero thinks that the plural שְׁלֵחַי refers to a botanical meaning 'shoots' linking the term to the list of various plants stated in verses 13–14 (Barbiero 2011:222).

<sup>4</sup>Bosadi means motherhood in Northern Sotho dialect of south Africa. Eco-bosadi would be the equivalent of eco-feminism in the Western context.

In verse 13a, the Hebrew פֶּרְדֵּס [paradise] is also found in Ecclesiastes 2:5 and Nehemiah 2:8 designates a 'Royal Park'. Due to the post-exilic context of the book (after 586 BCE) (Brettler 2006:186), פֶּרְדֵּס might also be linked with the Persian term *Paradidam* [behind the wall] or 'walled enclosure' (Müller 1988:195). Hence, the Septuagint simply translated the word by *παράδεισος*, probably identifying the garden of Song 4 as an inversion of the lost Garden of Eden of Genesis 2–3 (Landy 1983:183).

The first two plants in the Song's Garden are fruit trees: pomegranate (רַמְיָנִים) with delicious fruits (מְגֵדִים פְּרִי) (13a). In Oriental iconography, the term pomegranate is often linked with the tree of paradise, the tree of life (Keel 1994:144). Possibly the variety of fruit (פְּרִי) and exotic plants in Song 4:13–14 identify the Beloved with not only the promised land, but the Earth/garden of yield fruits and plants of all kinds (Landy 1983:192).

The earth becomes the woman and the woman becomes the earth. Whether the author had Genesis 1:12 in mind, it is not sure; but it is possible that he or she knew it since both texts are dated in the early Persian period. Most of the time this becoming one body with nature happens without our conscious awareness. But when it is not there, when life around us has diminished or vanished, we suddenly notice a deep emptiness and meaninglessness. It is then that we should listen to the cry of the earth protesting against its irresponsible inhabitants (Kavusa 2016:499).

The erotic depiction of the beloved woman through nature images implies that the author had the intrinsic worth of Earth in mind. The metaphor of Song 4 invites us to adopt this perception as we deal with Earth in any enterprise. Earth or the Promised Land is capable to provide for whatever is needed if we adopt the ethics of the Promised Land (Dt 8). Otherwise, instead of producing מְגֵדִים פְּרִי [delicious fruits] (Can 4:13a), it would turn into an unproductive and stressful land with thistles and thorns of Genesis 3:18 and would vomit his inhabitants.

The metaphor of a fruitful garden as depicted in verses 13–14 is probably based on the 'notion of the earth as a woman (cf. Song 2:17) from whose womb all vegetation springs forth' (Keel 1994:176). A society that does not value women is probably prone to disrespect nature as well. In other words, our attitudes towards women epitomise our attitudes towards nature (Masenya 2001:122).

Versets 13b–14 enlist delicious fruits and exotic plants of the garden. Henna (כַּפְרִיִּים) is the only one of the plants listed here that grows without human effort in Israel: 'even today it can be found in Jericho, the valley of the Jordan and the coastal plain' (Zohary 1982:190). Nard (נָרְדִים), twice repeated (13b & 14a), its perfume, is a symbol of erotic attraction of the woman (Can 1:12) in the Ancient Near East (Barbiero 2011:224).

While Saffron (כַּרְכֹּם) is used in the Mediterranean as condiment, the 'aromatic calamus' (קָקֵה) was used as anointing oil together with myrrh (מִרְרָה), cinnamon (קַיְמֹוֹן) and cassia (Ex 30:23). According to Jeremiah 6:20, Isaiah 43:24 and Ezekiel 27:19, the calamus was a commercial good imported from far away. In Proverb 7:17, calamus, myrrh and aloes (אֶהְלוֹת) are cited in relation to 'the bed of the strange woman' to attract her victims.

The plants in the garden depicted in verses 13a–14 are impressive not only because they were imported<sup>5</sup> luxuries: from Tyre, Phoenician, East Africa, Arabia, and India (Zohary 1982), but also because of they are said to be cultivated in a single garden whereas there is 'no place on earth did they all grow together' (Jenson 2005:50). Song 4:12–15 knows of no better Eden than this garden.

It is not by accident that these plants are used here: they were regarded as precious and were mostly used in cultic, medical or erotic attraction contexts (Barbiero 2011):

In the OT [*Old Testament*], we can match four parallels to the list of the Song. Two refer to erotic attraction (Ps 45:9 – 'myrrh, aloes and cassia'; Prov 7:17 – 'myrrh, aloe and cinnamon'), one to holiness (Exod 30:23–24 – 'balm, myrrh, cinnamon, aromatic calamus, cassia'), one to Wisdom (Sir 24:15 – 'cinnamon, balm, myrrh, galbanum, onyx, stacte, incense'). (p. 226)

The expressions such as 'every tree of frankincense' (כָּל־עֵץ צִיֵּץ לְבוֹנָה) (v. 14c) or 'all the most precious spices' (כָּל־יָרֵאֲשֵׁי בְּשִׂמִים) (v. 14d) testify at the incredible possibilities that a well-maintained Earth might offer. An ecological reading sees within these verses the reinforcement of the uniqueness and value of this garden. Earth/nature, the valuable 'locked garden' of Song 4, contains precious elements which are intrinsically destined to be valued and used not abused since located in a 'enclosed' domain.

### The availability of water (v. 15)

The Beloved is both a 'fountain sealed' (מַעְיָן חֲתוּם) (v. 12) and a well of living water (בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים), a fountain spring flowing from Lebanon (וּבְנֹלִים מִן־לְבָנוֹן) to irrigate the garden (v. 15c). Verse 12 highlights the sacredness or security of the fountain, while verse 15 focuses on its natural function. This explains the plural מַעְיָן גַּנִּים (literally 'fountain of the gardens') or a fountain that irrigates gardens (Murphy 1990:167). For this reason, Lys puts verse 15 in the mouth of the woman: *Je suis une fontaine de jardins, un puits d'eau courantes, ruisselant du Liban*<sup>6</sup> (Lys 1968:196). The Beloved woman is the fountain, and the fountain is the Beloved.

The Beloved is both a *fountain sealed* (מַעְיָן חֲתוּם) (v. 12) and a well of living water (בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים), a fountain spring flowing from Lebanon (וּבְנֹלִים מִן־לְבָנוֹן) to irrigate the garden (v. 15c).

<sup>5</sup>Only Pomegranates grew in Palestine, all others were imported luxuries (Jenson 2005:50).

<sup>6</sup>Translation into English: I am the fountain of garden, a well of running water flowing from Lebanon.

The sustainability idea here is that it is only a secured water supply that gives freshwater.

The water is said to be sourced from Lebanon. Lebanon is the living and secured place of the bride in Song 4:8. Ezekiel 31:1–9 compares Assyria with the evergreen forests of Lebanon: Birds, Beast and nations made the lofty Forests of Lebanon their secure living place. Ezekiel 31:8 says the cedars in the garden of God could not rival the beauty of Lebanon (v. 8). That is why Lebanon is included in the boundaries of the Promised Land (Dt 11:24; Jos 12:7).

The reference to Lebanon implies that Song 4:15 presents the enclosed garden as more beautiful than Eden. The freshwater of Lebanon never ceased to flow as its fountains are sealed. The expression חתם תורה in Isaiah 8:16 means 'keep the Torah securely'. Thus, Song 4:12 implies that there are security measures (mountain, lions, leopards), which sustains its freshness and prevent it from pollution. The flowing water of Lebanon is both accessible and protected. Just as the enduring snow of Lebanon guarantees the perennial freshness of its springs (Jr 18:14), the beloved (the garden) is permanently watered and never loses her power to refresh even in the hot Near Eastern region (Keel 1994:181). Hence, Jerusalem's restoration is compared to 'the return of the glory of Lebanon' (Is 60:13).

In contrast to a cistern keeping only collected rainwater, a well of living water (בְּאֵר מַיִם חַיִּים) of verse 15 is a shaft with a bubbling spring at the bottom (cf. Gn 26:19; Jn 4:10–15). The water of the enclosed garden is not *stagnant* but *living water*, a *flowing stream from Lebanon*. This water is as clear, fresh, and rejuvenating. It is therefore not an accident that water is situated at the literary frames (vv. 12, 15) of the unit. Water is life and assures the life of all living and outside the garden.

## Concluding remarks

On 28 July 2022 a sustainability Global Network report has made it clear that humans have consumed the totality of biological resources that the earth needs to regenerate the entire year. This means that for the rest of the year, we are living in 'ecological deficit by drawing down local resource stocks and accumulating carbon dioxide in the atmosphere'.<sup>7</sup>

This is particularly dangerous for humanity and the sustainability of the planet. Unless we know that there should be limits, the future of the planet is uncertain. That is where the metaphor of Song 4:12–15 about availability and restriction is relevant to limit the contemporary over-consumption mentality.

Just as the availability of and restrictions in the Garden of Genesis 2, the love metaphor of Song 4:12–15 reflects my perspective of viewing nature as both appealing (fruits, water, exotic plants) and restricted (sealed and enclosed). The metaphor assumes letting nature make itself

available to us, not just breaking its 'seals' and lockers, which could be disastrous.

Scientific data are indeed needed to make us ecologically responsible, 'but we also need love stories like the Song to touch us deeply' (Viviers 2001:154). Humans are not only rational beings but operate emotionally as well, and studies demonstrated the link between emotional intelligence and ecological attitudes (Robinson et al. 2019:225). The planet can be *saved* even by the insights conveyed in a love story like the Song if we, humans, have 'eyes for Nature' as much as we have 'eyes only for each other'. Love as devotion, reciprocity and mutualism, as expressed in Song 4, might act as a strong motivation to resist the commodification of Nature (Battson 2018:4). Love resists commodification of the *other*.

## Afterthought: Remaining questions

It should be noted that two main aspects of the text might pose problem for the ecological relevance of this text. First, the fact that this garden is imaginative might undermine the ecological potential of Song 4:12–5:1. Second, the fact that most of the plants in this imagined garden are imported luxuries does not fit with the ideal of eco-sustainability consisting of giving priority to indigenous plants. Finally, Meredith's (2013) book *Journeys in the Songscape: Space and the Song of Songs* gives negative view on ancient (locked) gardens might challenge the eco-delight analysis of this article.

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<sup>7</sup>Viewed 03 August 2022, from <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/earth-overshoot-day/>.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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