The story in Judg. v of Samson tying firebrands to the tails of foxes, and sending them forth to set fire to the fields of Philistia has become inextricably interwoven into the tapestry of the traditions surrounding this hero. However, a closer critique will show that the story as transmitted is not consistent with the biblical world and gives rise to three questions:

1. Are the facts of the story feasible and reasonable? In other words, could this be a historical account?
2. Is this a purely local and unparalleled story or are there similar traditions in other localities?
3. What links this story, whether historical or legendary, to the locality and period to which it is ascribed? In other words: what is its Sitz im Leben?

The biblical account relates that "... Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between the tails. And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards and olives" (Judg. xv 4-5). Many who have commented on the similarity between the legends of Samson and those of Heracles² have pointed out Ovid’s tale about Carseoli (Fasti IV 709ff.) as the parallel story in classical mythology. Ovid tells of a farmer’s boy who caught a fox (vulpes) stealing his chickens, tied straw to its tail and set it alight. The fox escaped into the neighbouring fields, setting them on fire and destroying the village’s entire crop. Since then, says Ovid, the Romans have chased foxes with burning straw tied to their tails around the circus on harvest day. J. G. Frazer³ tells of the ancient European custom of burning the last sheaf of wheat at the end of the harvest symbolizing the death of the "harvest spirit", or killing a fox in the fields representing the "corn spirit". However, apart from the fact that both Ovid’s story and Frazer’s report deal with corn, fire and foxes,
there is no connection between the themes underlying the two: in Carseoli it is the injured farmer who punishes the thieving fox and inadvertently causes disaster to his innocent fellow men, a theme which has no connection whatsoever with the religious custom of "burning the spirit of the harvest".

Other commentators refer to the story of Samson and the foxes as an example of a clever military ruse, comparing it to Gideon's attack (Judg. vii 16-19) or to Hannibal making a fool of Quintus Fabius Maximus Cunctator (Livy XXII xvii 7). However, Gideon's torches were carried by men to light their way and set fire to a camp, whilst Hannibal's torches were carried by oxen to fool the enemy and lure him away.

As far as I know, there are no records of foxes being used for such purposes, for the simple reason that it is impossible to induce two foxes tied tail to tail with a firebrand to run in a given direction: each would simply associate the other fox with the burning pain, and trying to get at each other's throat they would revolve in a circle. It is most unlikely that 150 such pairs would all run in one direction set by the instigator, as has been pointed out by many commentators.

The first two questions are thus answered: it is most unlikely that the story is a historical record or meant to be one; nor can it be considered a local version of a widely known theme. This conclusion is further supported by a fact which is largely ignored: the animal mentioned in the Bible, šā'ēl, is not the fox known in Europe but the jackal. To quote F. S. Bodenheimer, "Jackal (Canis aureus) and fox (Vulpes vulpes) ... are intermixed in the animal fable. Whilst all Greek and Roman fables refer to the fox, most of the animals mentioned in the tales of Palestine or Irak are jackals. The name fox was often retained when Greek fables were translated back into Oriental languages, whilst the oldest Oriental source had meant the jackal. It is difficult to distinguish between them in the few representations we have got of them, because of lack of care in details." ... "Foxes (Vulpes vulpes) and jackals (Canis aureus) are quite often figured, but they are not always easy to distinguish from each other." Even Bodenheimer himself confuses the two, in three instances calling the fox Canis aureus and the jackal Vulpes vulpes. This confusion already appears in antiquity and Herodotus (II 67) reports that the wolves — λύκοι — in Egypt are as small as the foxes in Greece — δαρακτίς, a fact which makes it more difficult to distinguish between them.