

### SECTION III

#### BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

#### INTRODUCTION

The twenty biblical narrative songs offered here demonstrate the Kerala Jews' familiarity with the Hebrew Bible and midrash, as well as the creative process by which they interwove stories from their own imagination with stories they had studied formally or heard from family or community. In addition to noting some of the many Kerala cultural references that pervade the songs, the notes following individual songs in this section point out biblical passages and midrashic references from many different sources, implicitly demonstrating the wide variety of Hebrew manuscripts and publications that were once available in Kerala Jewish homes.<sup>1</sup> In most cases I have depended on Louis Ginzberg's English-language *Legends of the Jews* (1967–1969) as a secondary source to locate references. I also cite the work of fellow scholars who have generously helped with their knowledge of the Hebrew sources.

Perhaps even more than other Malayalam songs, the biblical narratives have served as both education and entertainment for the women singers and their audiences. In my working conversations with Ruby Daniel over the years, it became clear that much of her own knowledge of Bible and midrash came from the songs themselves, as well as from explanatory stories she heard as a child from her grandmother, who taught her most of the songs. She told many of these stories to me in explicating the songs she was translating, much as her grandmother had told them to her—and so the hermeneutic process—conveying ethical and spiritual values through live storytelling—continued down to at least one more generation.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these songs are highly entertaining, especially when enlivened by the creation of dramatic scenes, bold actions, and a colloquial style of conversation or commentary conveying the personality and emotions of the characters, sometimes with a humorous twist. This style is characteristic of almost half the biblical songs

---

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, no one was able to index the Hebrew books in the homes of various Kerala Jewish families before their collections were broken up through *aliyah*, acquisition by collectors, and sales to antique dealers. Some are listed in Sassoon's *Ohel David* (1939) and a few can be found in the archives of the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life.

<sup>2</sup> See Johnson 2006 for a discussion of our process.

presented here (songs 43, 44, 50, and 54–59), and it is associated particularly with the portrayal of female characters—not only well-known heroine-like Sarah, Rachel (speaking from the grave), Ruth, and Esther, but also the daughter of Pharaoh, Serah the daughter of Asher, Goliath’s mother, Haman’s daughter, and even the Torah personified as a bride.

Although the songs could be sung for enjoyment at any time, information is available about special performance occasions for some biblical narratives. Not surprisingly, song 56 (The Story of Ruth) was sometimes performed during the holiday of Shavuot, when the Hebrew *megillah* (scroll) of Ruth is traditionally read. Likewise, the three Purim songs (57, 58, and 59) were enjoyed during parties celebrating Purim, which was reportedly as rowdy a holiday in Kerala as elsewhere in the Jewish world.<sup>3</sup> Songs about Joseph were often associated with weddings, as discussed in the commentary on song 44.

The eight-day holiday of Hanukkah was the occasion for special evening parties in the Kadavumbhagam-Kochi community, where women sang while performing circular *kaḷippāṭṭu* dances (Johnson 2016). In addition to song 60 (the Hanukkah Song), three others translated here were recorded as part of such a dance performance: songs 41, 43, and 51. Although texts for songs 51 and 60 are found only in Kadavumbhagam-Kochi notebooks, the Ten Songs of King Solomon (41) and the Song of Mother Sarah (43) are not confined to such performances, having been preserved in notebooks and recorded by women from other communities.

Like many other songs in this book, biblical narratives share melodies with Hebrew songs as well as a variety of other sources, including non-Jewish folk and popular songs from Kerala.

---

<sup>3</sup> In an unpublished paper, I have discussed the style of Malayalam Jewish Purim songs in relation to a Kerala Christian dance drama tradition (Johnson 2018).