

Songs 54 and 55: Two Songs about King David

In content, style, and performance, these two entertaining and complex songs are so closely related that they can be viewed as one ongoing narrative, although they do not appear combined as a single song in any of the collected notebooks. Neither have we found evidence that they were composed by the same person or that they were ever performed together. It does seem likely, however, that one song was patterned after the other.

Both songs are rich in references to Hebrew Bible and midrash, providing a vivid example of how their Kerala composers and singers were acquainted with primary Jewish sources. Also, each song has at least one important element or embellishment that may be unique to the Kerala Jews. The combined narrative begins in song 54 with young David killing the Philistine giant Goliath and continues through song 55 with more fragmentary stories about later incidents in which he narrowly escapes from danger. Gamliel (2005, 175–187) also analyzes the two songs together, with reference to biblical and midrashic sources.

Apparently “David and the Mosquito” was the more widely known of the two songs, appearing in thirteen different notebooks from Kochi, some from the Paradesi community and some from Kadavumbhagam, whereas “David and the Spider” is found in only two notebooks, both Paradesi. In only one notebook (B-7) are both songs found, but not contiguously. Both texts of “David and the Spider” date from the nineteenth century and are written in an older and more obscure Malayalam, similar to the oldest variant of the Mosquito song (found in notebook S-9, which has been dated to the mid-nineteenth century), in contrast to the more modern Malayalam of the Mosquito song as it is found in later versions and rendered in Zacharia’s 2005 text.

The earliest available recording of “David and the Mosquito” (song 54) was made in 1977 by Dolly Japheth and Ruby Daniel, and it was recorded again by Venus Lane and Simcha Yosef in 2002 for the *Oh, Lovely Parrot!* CD. Composed in the same rhythmic pattern, “David and the Spider” was recorded in 2023, when Venus sang it to the same tune that her aunts Dolly and Ruby had used for the mosquito song, with the same pattern of half-line repetition.