

Words by Justine Hardy

# Safe Passage

What does it mean to hold a passport?

***'That he be let to pass in safety through your lands...'***

***'To allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance...'***

The lines above are from two passports. They are simple requests for safe passage, asking for the same thing on behalf of the bearer, using similar language. But they are separated by almost two and a half thousand years. The first dates from around 445 BC, the second from the inside page of my current UK passport.

The first is translated from the Hebrew Bible. It is in the Book of Nehemiah, chapter 2, verses 7-9. Nehemiah was a member of the court of King Artaxerxes I of Persia. As well as being perhaps the first bearer of a passport, he is described as a cup-bearer and possibly a eunuch. He was a man of many roles, and neither the lowly-sounding nature of his court post, nor the lack of some particular parts, seems to have got in the way of Nehemiah's rapid rise.

When he received the news that his home, the Kingdom of Judah, had been battered, and that the walls of Jerusalem

had been broken down, he asked the king if he might return to Judah so that he could rebuild his city. Artaxerxes elevated his loyal cup-bearer to Governor of Judah, and furnished him with a letter asking the governors of Trans-Euphrates to grant safe passage to his loyal servant.

So many of the characters in the world's scriptures are conflation of people, myths and actual events. But Nehemiah is recorded as a real figure. As well as leaping from court servant to governor, he was the highly energetic rebuild of the walls of Jerusalem, restoring them from the Sheep Gate in the north to the Dung Gate in the south. His vigorous governorship coincided with the end of a 70-year exile of the Jewish people – the period of the Babylonian Captivity, as prophesied by Jeremiah and brought about by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian cohorts. It is an early recording of an exile that severed a people from their land.

In a more hum-drum vein, the second passport line that I quoted is from the inside of my own passport, issued in London in 2016. The front cover is dark red, as they have been since 1988, and

the title line reads 'European Union'.

The next passport I hold may be a reversion to the old dark blue version, The Old Bluey as it was known. It will be a change that symbolises much for our little islands.

Between these two – Nehemiah's letter from the King of Persia and the document that I hold – the passport has come to symbolise something rather different to its original purpose.

The earliest records of 'documents of safe conduct' in this country are from the reign of Henry V. The king granted them to assure the security of his emissaries as they sought defensive and economic alliances. In 1794 the Secretary of State and the Home Office took over the task, though fairly free passage without travel documentation was possible until the First World War. A creeping change began with the passing of the British Nationality and Status Aliens Act in 1914, an act created in response to what Hansard described as 'interracial and ethnicity concerns' – a political paraphrase for reactions to an increasing flow of immigrants.

Perhaps it was in a climate of nascent racial tension that the symbolic meaning



of the passport began to shift. Previously it had been a powerful piece of paper in the hands of the holder, ensuring certain rights. The incremental change from 1914 meant that the passport began to be a form of identity paper as well as a document of safe passage. What had previously granted freedom of travel began to be a restrictor of movement, as the world powers drew up a new order of borders and nations, many based on mythical or poorly-interpreted power structures and only partially proven economic alliances.

Earlier I mentioned the Babylonian sacking of Jerusalem and the long exile of that time not just for flowery Biblical and Torah effect. It was to illustrate a vast movement of undocumented people at about the same time as the issue of the first recorded passport.

Now, at a distance of two and a half millennia from Nehemiah, and a century on from the British Nationality and Status Aliens Act, a refugee or 'stateless person' is granted a 'travel

document'. This is a booklet issued under the auspices of the 145 states that signed up to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It looks like a passport, except it is not. While it does grant a level of visa-free travel through the 145 signatory states, it does not guarantee safe passage to the holder, nor does it prove that they have residential status in the country providing the document.

Many people have a tendency to assume that refugees want to stay in the countries they have reached. They believe that refugees must surely want to make new lives off the fat of the land into which they have escaped, that they want to take jobs from those who call themselves maybe English, German, French, or perhaps American.

When a refugee enters a refugee camp their passport is taken from them. There is then a long and very slow process of applying for new documentation of identity. Many, so many of them, do not want to get a new passport,

nor to have to start a new life. They just want safe passage back to their old life, to the world that they were forced to leave, a world that may never again be as it once was.

The passport marks where we have come from, and where we are travelling towards. It is a deceptively light document that bears a lot of weight on our sense of who we are and where we belong.

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**Illustration by LUKE WALWYN.**