

**THE MERCHANT FROM
SEPHARAD**

James Hutson-Wiley

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The Merchant from Sepharad, the third book in the Sugar Merchant series, would not have been written without the patience and support of my wife, for which I will eternally be grateful.

Dr. James (Ted) Blanton once again provided substantial assistance in ensuring that the narrative was as historically accurate as possible. Dr. Blanton also supervised the construction of travel maps drawn by Sabastian Ballard, a cartographer and travel guide writer based in the United Kingdom. Intentional or not, any historical, theological, or geographic errors are entirely my responsibility.

THE AUTHOR'S CONFESSION

In the late twelfth century, the Jewish philosopher, physician, and Rabbi, Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) wrote in his *Guide for the Perplexed*:

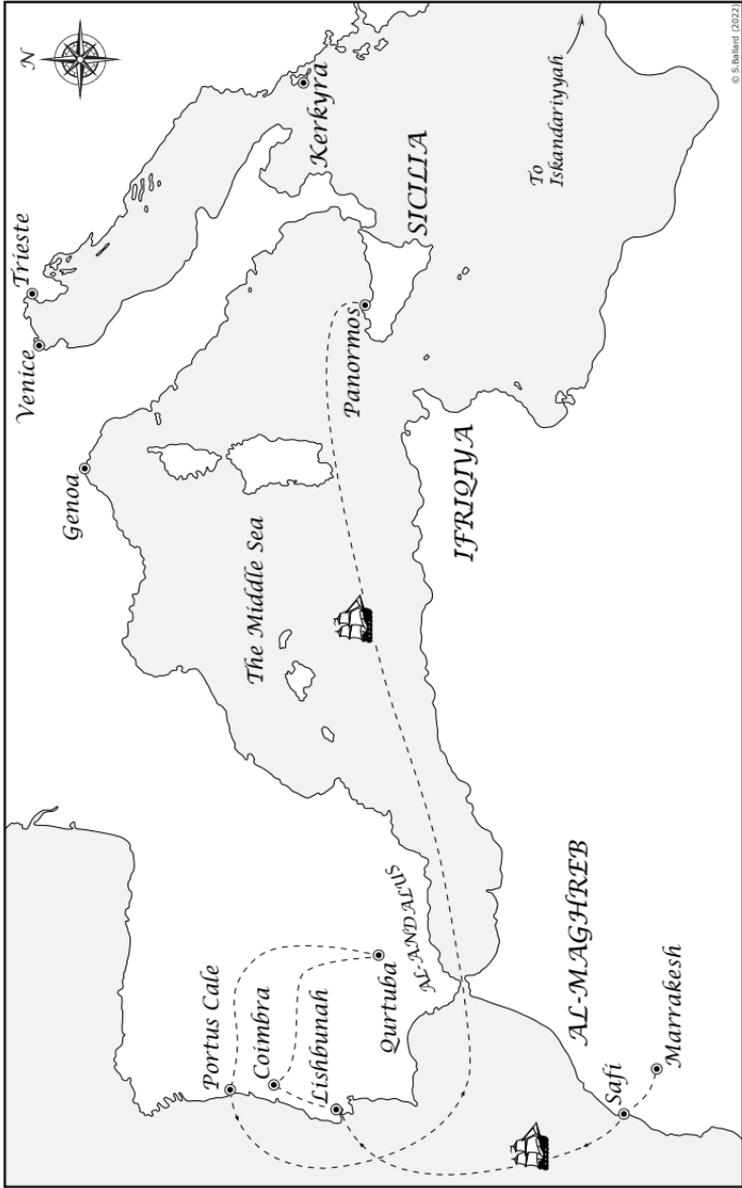
“Do not consider it proof because it is written in books. A liar who will deceive with his tongue will not hesitate to do the same with his pen.”

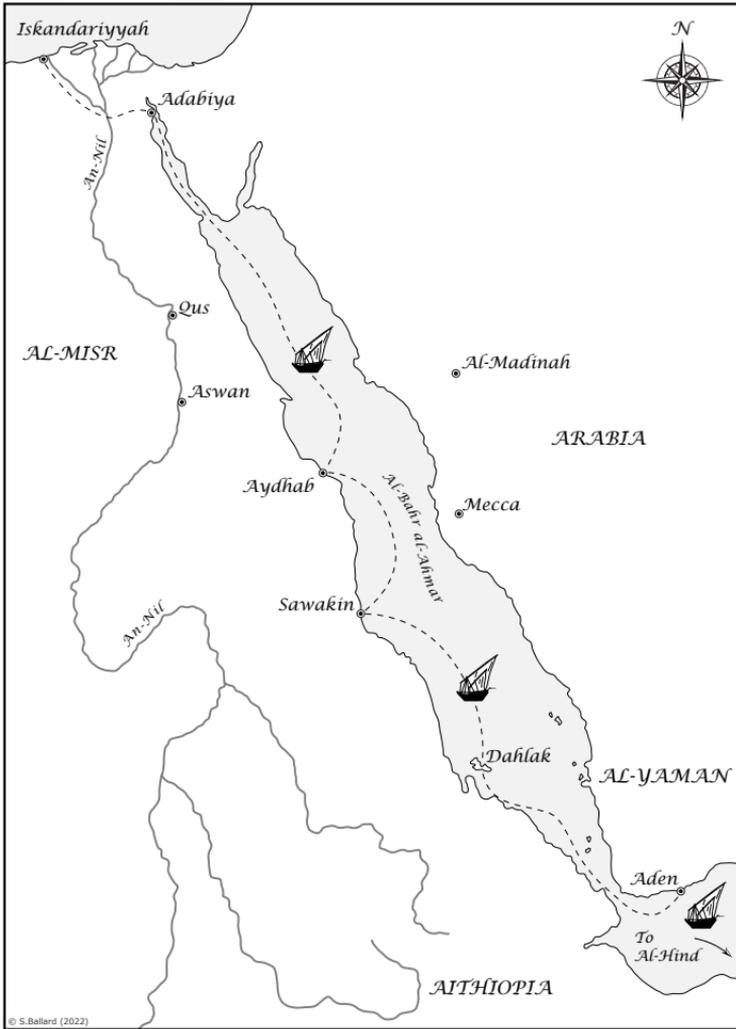
If we are to be serious students of history, this maxim is worth remembering. Many first-hand accounts of the commercial and social revolution of the eleventh and twelfth centuries are biased by both personal and political agendas. Some are pure fiction or, worse, outright falsehoods. Although many characters described in the following pages were actual participants in the tumultuous events of the early twelfth century, we can only guess at their beliefs and motivations.

Notable exceptions exist within the trove of Jewish commercial correspondence discovered in the Cairo Genizah. Scholars have devoted themselves to recovering these documents, which provide a glimpse into what the revolution's participants believed to be true. Examples may be found in Elizabeth Lambourn's masterful work: *Abraham's Luggage, A Social life of Things in the Medieval Indian Ocean World*.

Regarding the commercial revolution of the twelfth century and its transformative effect on the theology of the Jewish faith, I have relied upon translations of contemporary sources. Although Maimonides was only a child during the period covered by this novel, Moshe Halbertal's *Maimonides Life and Thought* was helpful. Jacob Neusner's *Understanding Rabbinic Judaism from Talmudic to Modern Times* was also invaluable.

To the extent possible within a work of fiction, I have attempted to avoid lies and discover the truth. As is the case in the first two books of this series, I have followed the example of the first historian, Herodotus: if the truth is unclear or unknown, fabricate it.





DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The following characters in the novel were actual persons whose existence is well documented in historical sources.

ALFONSO HENRIQUES, King of Portugal

HIYYA AL-DAUDI, chief rabbi of Portugal and adviser to King Alfonso Henriques

YAISH IBN YAHYA, Jewish mercenary and son of Hiyya al-Daudi

TEOTONIO, prior to the monastery of Santa Cruz de Coimbra

MAIMON BEN JOSEPH, Rabbi, and father of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides

ABU AL-QASIM AHMED, chief judge of the city of Cordoba and father of the Muslim philosopher Averroes

GIORGOS OF ANTIOCH, emir, and commander of the Kingdom of Sicily's armed forces

HALFON BEN HALEVI, an Egyptian Jewish merchant, engaged in the India trade

MADMUN BEN HASAN-JAPHETH, Jewish merchant and leader of the Jewish community in Yemen

ABRAHAM BEN YIJU, a Tunisian Jewish merchant
in Yemen and India

BENJAMIN OF TUDELA, a Jewish traveler and
author

PRAEFATIO

The Kingdom of Sicilia

The Christian year 1148

The story you are about to read was written by my friend, Joshua ben Elazar, a Jew. It is a tale of a journey, both physical and spiritual. At my insistence, Joshua wrote his tale in Arabic, the common language in the lands bordering the Middle Sea. His manuscript followed the conventions of the time, but Joshua refused to write God's full name. If he did so, he explained, his manuscript could never be destroyed.

When Joshua first arrived, al-Andalus, which Latins know as Hispania, was governed by the Muslim al-Murabit dynasty, subservient to the caliph of Baghdad. Al-Andalus has been under Muslim control for over four hundred years. A change in control, however, can be expected. With the success of the armed pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the Pope's legions intend to wrest control of the riches of al-Andalus. Christian armies are making significant gains in the north and west of that land. At the same time, a new Muslim sect, calling themselves the Almoravid, has risen in Ifriqiya and shares the same goals. The Jews, who refer to all followers of Islam as Ishmaelites, are caught between these would-

be conquerors. Alliances constantly shift, and the world is in turmoil.

In the Levante, further to the east, the situation is more confusing. The various kingdoms established by the armed pilgrims, called *crucesignati*, are at one another's throats. Taking advantage of the resulting weakness, Muslim armies are forming to drive Christians from the Holy Land. To make matters worse, there is open hostility between western Christians, subservient to the Pope, and those in the east, who bow to the Patriarch of Constantinopolis.

Jews, too, have their divisions. There is a conflict between those who follow the laws set by their Rabbis and a sect known as Karaites, who disavow such rules. At stake for all is not only the matter of faith but the potential advantages from the rapidly growing and highly lucrative trade routes to India (known as *al-Hind* in Arabic), for spices and other precious commodities.

Here on the island of Sicilia, we enjoy a privileged position. For many years we have satisfied the needs of people of all faiths. We are not perfect, but we are a bastion of peace. I do not know how long that will last. Our ruler, King Ruggiero, has his own desire to achieve wealth and power in the Middle Sea.

It is through this maze of conflict and confusion that Joshua must navigate.

William ibn Thoma
Notarius Magistros
Panormos, Sicilia

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west.
How can I find savor in food? How shall it
be sweet to me?
How shall I render my vows and my
bonds while yet
Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and
I in Arab chains?
A light thing would it seem to me
to leave all the good things of Spain –
Seeing how precious in my eyes
to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

Yehuda Halevi – Tudela 1140

I

MY TALE BEGINS

Panormos, Sicilia

The Christian year 1146

I was in a deplorable state when I first met William. I possessed nothing: no baggage and no coin. My shabby black robe was torn and stained with seawater. My hair and beard were untrimmed, and I was full of rage.

William was resting comfortably in the garden when I banged on his gate and demanded entrance. The servant who answered looked at me with disdain. I am certain he thought I was a beggar; he made to drive me away.

“My name is Joshua ben Elazar,” I shouted. “I have business here.”

A blond-headed man of my age, dressed in a fine gown of gazz, looked up from the manuscript he was reading and gestured to the servant to stand aside.

“What is your business here?” he asked. “I am William, the son of the physician Thoma. Do you require his services?”

I swallowed my anger and answered as politely as I could.

“Cousin, forgive my appearance, but I am Joshua, the son of Elazar,” I said. “Our grandfathers were partners in commerce. Your father, Thoma, knows mine well. I have traveled far and will be making a longer journey soon. I ask if I can rest with you until my departure. My father said he would write to me here and told me to feel free to call upon you.”

William was not my cousin, but I called him that. Long ago, our respective grandfathers and their Muslim companion had formed a commercial trading venture to trade in al-sukkar and other precious spices. Each of them had owned one-third of what, under Latin law, was called a *Collegantia*. Together, the partners overcame adversity and achieved great success. Now the *Collegantia* was owned by my father and William’s Muslim true uncle, Abdullah. William’s father, the physician Thoma, no longer possessed an interest in the enterprise.

William greeted me gracefully, but I knew he found my appearance distressing. I had not trimmed my beard for weeks. Although my skin was brown from the sun, I knew my face reflected the weariness and anger I felt.

“Forgive me, Joshua,” said William. “Sit with me here, and I will have one of our servants fetch your belongings. No letter has arrived for you. Please stay with us until it does.”

“I have no belongings, only the clothes on my back,” I said. I sat on the bench opposite William. “I would like a cup of wine.”

“Of course,” William responded, gesturing to a servant nearby. “I will have a cup myself. From where have you come?”

“The land of Sepharad,” I declared.

William ignored the sullenness which marked my words. “Forgive me,” he said. “I do not know this word. I have never heard of that place.”

I was surprised at William’s ignorance. He appeared to be an educated man.

“How can you not know this, William?” I said. “I have resided in the cities of Lishbunah and Qurtuba. Those cities are in the land of Sepharad.”

William looked at me in puzzlement. “I know Qurtuba is in al-Andalus, and Lishbunah is in the territory called ‘Gharb al-Andalus’ or, as some would say, Arth al-Bortucal, but what is this land of Sepharad?” he asked.

I shook my head in disgust. “Have you not read the words of the prophet Obadiah? The Muslims claim these cities are in al-Andalus. We disagree. It is the land of Sepharad and has been so since ancient times.”

William’s face betrayed his confusion. “Joshua, again forgive me,” he said. “I do not recall the words of Obadiah. I do not understand.”

In retrospect, I should have expected William’s response, but at the time, I was incredulous. I did not attempt to hide my feelings.

“Christians and Ishmaelites – you call them Muslims – think the world revolves around you,” I said. “You control the world and ignore

the heritage of my people, the Jews. None of you bother to learn anything of us or our history. You ask about the land of Sepharad. We Jews arrived long ago in what you call Al-Andalus as slaves of the Romans. According to the prophet Obadiah, who lived long before your own Yeshua of Natzeret, this was the land of Sepharad. Read this yourself in the scriptures. From that time, we have grown in wealth and power. Can you believe that one of our rabbis became a grand vizier to the ruler of Gharnata? Despite our success, no one has attempted to understand us. We are treated as refuse.”

William raised his brows and pondered my words. I should not have blamed him for his ignorance. Nothing has changed since my people’s exile from Siyyon. Our treatment everywhere has been the same. I did not, however, apologize for my curtness with William and gave him no time to respond.

“If my father permits, I will return to Yerushalayim with my people. G-d has promised through the prophet that we Jews will inherit all the lands of the south. ‘The day of judgment for all nations is soon at hand. Evil will be punished, and the righteous renewed,’ says the scripture. You do not know this?”

I could see that William remained at a loss for words. The anger which had been building in me since I fled Arth al-Bortucal came to a head.

“Your father, Thomas, spent years amongst followers of Islam,” I said. “His mother was an Ishmaelite, and your father was raised in that faith. Now, your father is a Christian. Although you live in Sicilia, where all faiths are welcome, it seems you know nothing about my people.”

William now opened his mouth in shock. “Joshua, I am no enemy,” he said. “If I have offended you, please accept my apology. And please tell me more.”

We conversed well into the evening. After my second cup of wine, my anger began to dissipate. My journey to Sicilia had been profoundly difficult, and the horror of recent events was still on my mind. I knew this was no reason to be rude to William, and I apologized for my behavior. At dusk, his father, the physician Thoma, arrived home, accompanied by his assistant, Roland. Thoma greeted me warmly and seemed delighted to meet me. But before he could speak, Roland had much to say and many questions. From my father’s description, I knew Roland found it challenging to speak with brevity.

“Ah, my boy, I see you have had a difficult journey,” he exclaimed. “I am Roland, the assistant, friend, and partner in the art of curing illness to the great physician Thomas who stands here before you. Some still call him Thoma. I do not. You should know that I, too, am a physician. You do not look well. Where have you been? Why have you not visited us before? I know something

of your father, Elazar. I have heard stories about your grandfather. His name was Jusuf. Is that not correct? I assume that he has passed. Hakim Thomas says he was a great man. Please accept my condolences. But what about you? You must tell us everything! Thomas has invited me to dine here tonight. You are dining with us well?"

William interrupted before Roland could continue or ask again where Joshua had been.

"You are right, Hakim Roland," said William. "Joshua has made a difficult journey and has only now arrived from the city of Qurtuba. I was about to take him to his chamber so he can prepare for the evening meal. He will need to change his robe and trim his beard. His journey has been difficult. We can discuss all this later."

With that remark, William led me away. As he did, William whispered: "Prepare yourself for more questions, Joshua. We love Roland, but he can be tiresome. Having another large cup of wine before we dine would do you no harm. I will give you a clean robe to wear."

I thanked William for his kindness; I did need to collect my wits. During our meal, William prompted his father and Roland with questions to keep the potential inquisition at bay.

"Joshua, so that you may eat in peace, perhaps my father can relate some of his history and recount what transpired between him and your father," William said. I nodded my head in agreement; I understood William's intentions.

William's father required no further prompting and began to speak. Roland, of course, interrupted.

"Hakim Thomas will be too modest. Through his skill, he saved my life and saved Jerusalem from the Turks. He has traveled the world, cured the ill, and is the personal physician to Ruggiero, the King of Sicilia. He even befriended a skilled Hashshashin, who helped him prevail in many great battles."

William's father buried his head in his hands when Roland mentioned the Hashshashin. I learned later that Thoma had never told anyone the true story of how Roland had unknowingly caused the death of his great friend. The memory of this was too painful. Engrossed in his story, Roland did not notice.

"Hakim Thomas was treated poorly in Jerusalem and thrown in prison, and I saved him. I was on the path to becoming a knight. Did you know that? My actions closed that door forever, but Hakim Thomas rescued me again. It was because of him that I became a physician. Did you know that he gave up his rights to the Collegantia and that the Church stole his fortune? I am certain you do. He asked only for support to create our hospice here. You must visit us there, and we will show you what we have done. William here is a respected counselor and scribe. William studied law, both Canon and Roman, at the great institution of Bologna. Everyone respects his

wisdom. That is why he is the right hand of our emir. He will tell you more himself. If you need anything on our island, it can be done. Is not that correct, William?”

Roland did not wait for William to respond. He paused to take a breath and peered closely at me. “You do not look well,” he pronounced. “We should examine you. Has anyone looked at the color of your excrement?”

Although it was true that I felt unwell, the last thing I wanted was for Roland to conduct an exploration of my waste.

I am not sure that William’s father said more than a few words; Roland dominated the conversation until it was time for sleep. Although I listened attentively, I spoke little myself.

Fortunately, over the following days, William’s father and Roland continued to spend long hours at the Hospice, and William’s duties at court were few, so we had time to talk in private. I remained his guest for the next month, waiting for word from my father. Over that time, I began to relax and shared some of my tales of tribulation in Al-Andalus with William. I believe he tried to comprehend what I had faced.

“William,” I said, “you cannot truly understand. You cannot walk in my boots. You can nod your head in understanding. You can offer condolence and prayers, but you will never be able to share my pain. You will never know what it is to be a Jew in the lands of Islam or those under Christian rule. I

will do my best to explain, but, in the end, you will still know nothing.”

“I will try to learn,” William assured me. “I will listen. Better yet, why not take the time to put your story in writing? The letter you are awaiting from your father will take time to reach our shores. Besides, I can see that your soul is tortured. Setting your tale down in script may be of benefit.”

William was correct. I wanted to remember all that transpired in the land of Sepharad. The fire I had caused was still vivid in my memory, as was the brutal murder of my dearest friends. I had failed terribly but learned much. Perhaps the exercise of putting my thoughts on a parchment would provide solace. Perhaps I would be better prepared for the task I had sworn to undertake. Thus, I present, in the following pages, all that is still fresh in my memory.