



The Mystery of the Aleph: Mathematics, the Kabbalah, and the Search for Infinity

By Amir D. Aczel

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From the end of the 19th century until his death, one of history's most brilliant mathematicians languished in an asylum. The Mystery of the Aleph tells the story of Georg Cantor (1845-1918), a Russian-born German who created set theory, the concept of infinite numbers, and the "continuum hypothesis," which challenged the very foundations of mathematics. His ideas brought expected denunciation from established corners - he was called a "corruptor of youth" not only for his work in mathematics, but for his larger attempts to meld spirituality and science.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The search for infinity, that sublime and barely comprehensible mystery, has exercised both mathematicians and theologians over many generations. Jewish mystics, in particular, labored with elaborate numerological schema to imagine the pure nothingness of infinity, while scientists such as Galileo, the great astronomer, and Georg Cantor, the inventor of modern set theory (as well as a gifted Shakespearean scholar), brought their training to bear on the unimaginable infinitude of numbers and of space, seeking the key to the universe.

In this sometimes technical but always accessible narrative, Amir Aczel, author of the spirited study *Fermat's Last Theorem*, contemplates such matters as the Greek philosopher Zeno's several paradoxes; the curious careers of defrocked priests, (literal) mad scientists, and sober scholars whose work helped untangle some of those paradoxes; and the conundrums that modern mathematics has substituted for the puzzles of yore. To negotiate some of those enigmas requires a belief not unlike faith, Aczel hints, noting, "We may find it hard to believe that an elegant and seemingly very simple system of numbers and operations such as addition and multiplication--elements so intuitive that children learn them in school--should be fraught with holes and logical hurdles." Hard to believe, indeed. Aczel's book makes for a fine and fun exercise in brain-stretching, while providing a learned survey of the regions where science and religion meet. --Gregory McNamee

From Publishers Weekly

Aczel's compact and fascinating work of mathematical popularization uses the life and work of the German mathematician Georg Cantor (1845-1918) to describe the history of infinity. Aof human thought about boundlessly large numbers, sequences and sets. Aczel begins with the ancient Greeks, who made infinite series a basis for famous puzzles, and Jewish medieval mystics' system of thought (Kabbalah), which used sophisticated ideas to describe the attributes of the one and infinite God. Moving to 19th-century Germany, mathematician Aczel (*Fermat's Last Theorem*) introduces a cast of supporting characters along with the problems on which they worked. He then brings in Cantor, whose branch of mathAcalled set theoryA"leads invariably to great paradoxes," especially when the sets in question are infinite. Are there as (infinitely) many points on a line as there are inside a square or within a cube? Bizarrely, Cantor discovered, the answer is yes. But (as he also showed) some infinities are bigger than others. To distinguish them, Cantor used the Hebrew letter aleph: the number of whole numbers is aleph-null; the number of irrational numbers, aleph-one. These "transfinite numbers" pose new problems. One, called the continuum hypothesis, vexed Cantor for the rest of his life, through a series of breakdowns and delusions: others who pursued it have also gone mad. This hypothesis turns out to be neither provable, nor disprovable, within the existing foundations of mathematics: Aczel spends his last chapters explaining why. His biographical armatures, his clean prose and his asides about Jewish mysticism keep his book reader friendly. It's a good introduction to an amazing and sometimes baffling set of problems, suited to readers interested in mathAeven, or especially, if they lack training. B&w illustrations not seen by PW. 5-city author tour; \$30,000 ad/promo; 30,000 first printing. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-Aczel tells of mathematicians struggling with absolute infinity and some of its mind-bending ramifications. The crown jewel of this struggle was conceived more than a century ago by Georg

Cantor and remains an enigma to mathematicians. Cantor spent his life going back and forth between trying to prove and disprove his continuum hypothesis. In the Kabbalah, the aleph "represents the infinite nature, and the oneness, of God." Cantor deliberately picked this symbol for use in his equations: to him, trying to understand the absolute infinite was like trying to touch the face of God. About 50 years after his death, another mathematician definitively showed that the continuum hypothesis cannot be proven valid or invalid by any known means. Aczel provides a good history leading up to and past Cantor's work. Personal stories of people such as Pythagoras, Galileo, Newton, and G"del are mixed in with well-put explanations of the concepts they pondered. A brief history of the Kabbalah and highlights of some of its concepts help readers understand Cantor's work. The author writes cleanly and clearly on a complex subject, and readers don't have to be good at math to enjoy this book. It's perfect for analytically minded students who love to ponder big questions. Those who enjoyed the popular cosmology books by Stephen Hawking are likely to devour this one as well.

Sheila Shoup, Fairfax County Public Library, VA

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