



The Man Who Counted, Brazilian and English editions.

## **The Man Who Counted**

**by Malba Tahan**

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Having attended half-day school until the twelfth grade, like all children in Brazil (and most of the rest of the world), I like to believe I was homeschooled growing up in a big, lively, educated family. I truly believe my high test scores and subsequent acceptance into graduate programs in the USA were due mostly to the informal education I received around my family's dinner table.

Dinner conversations and tales told by my parents comprised the bulk of that education. One of the tales often heard at home was the one of the "35 camels", one of the first chapters of books my father often quoted or read from was entitled The Man Who Counted ("*O Homem que Calculava*" in its original Portuguese). In this chapter a problem involving addition of fractions, and camels, along with the virtues of generosity and justice, is delightfully explained and solved. The book is the tale of a poor Mathematician with genius and common-sense enough to earn the respect and protection of a sheik and the caliph of Baghdad. Each chapter consists of a mathematical problem and how Beremiz solves it, but also invariably involves other fascinating tales. And to top it all off, the story concludes as the Man Who Counted discovers Christ through Mathematics and the truth of the Christian religion. The book has interesting historical references and in a post 9/11 world it sheds a different light on Muslim culture.

Malba Tahan is the pseudonym of a Brazilian Catholic school teacher who loved Mathematics and pioneered inventive ways to teaching it. He was born in Rio and raised in a little town near where I went to college, and my inter-University Choir was named after him by its director, a man who believed Tahan's greatness was largely ignored by the people of his own culture. Fortunately for my father and for me, his work seems to be re-visited and admired again today. I was able to find several websites in Portuguese about this great author.

In our last family trip to Brazil I was happy to find a new edition of this old Brazilian classic in the airport bookstore, and in it I discovered a reference to an English translation. Upon arriving back I used the web to locate and buy a copy—available from online used booksellers—and my husband, who deals with complex mathematics daily, promptly began evening read-aloud sessions.

However: unfortunately the English translation is poor and it betrays the very premise of the book: the Truth of Christianity. The last chapter alone exemplifies the problem: the English translation does not mention Beremiz' conversion! As I have been working with professional translation since my graduate school ( my thesis revolved around this very issue), I propose to the readers of the Heart and Mind the following: if you do decide on purchasing The Man Who Counted, feel free to email me and I will send you my much more accurate translation of the last chapter, which is actually very short. The Portuguese version also offers appendices on each chapter with added mathematical explanations and I would be willing also to do send those to interested readers.

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