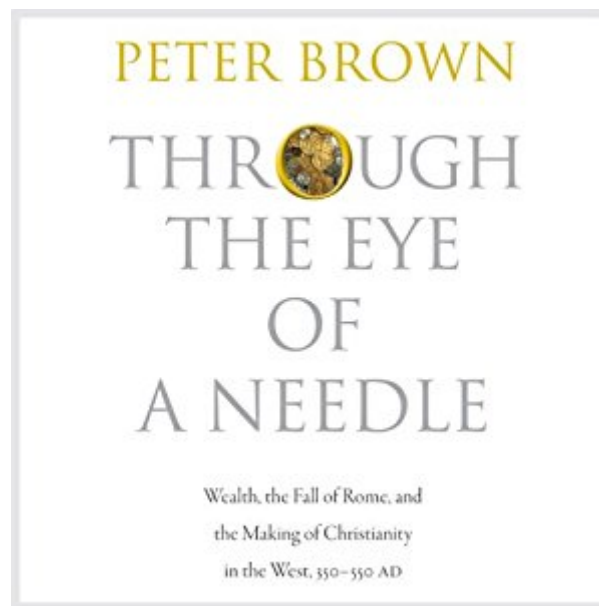


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# Through The Eye Of A Needle: Wealth, The Fall Of Rome, And The Making Of Christianity In The West, 350-550 AD



## Synopsis

Jesus taught his followers that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Yet by the fall of Rome, the church was becoming rich beyond measure. *Through the Eye of a Needle* is a sweeping intellectual and social history of the vexing problem of wealth in Christianity in the waning days of the Roman Empire, written by the world's foremost scholar of late antiquity. Peter Brown examines the rise of the church through the lens of money and the challenges it posed to an institution that espoused the virtue of poverty and called avarice the root of all evil. Drawing on the writings of major Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome, Brown examines the controversies and changing attitudes toward money caused by the influx of new wealth into church coffers, and describes the spectacular acts of divestment by rich donors and their growing influence in an empire beset with crisis. He shows how the use of wealth for the care of the poor competed with older forms of philanthropy deeply rooted in the Roman world, and sheds light on the ordinary people who gave away their money in hopes of treasure in heaven. *Through the Eye of a Needle* challenges the widely held notion that Christianity's growing wealth sapped Rome of its ability to resist the barbarian invasions, and offers a fresh perspective on the social history of the church in late antiquity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An excellent, magisterial investigation into the history of Latin Western Christianity from 350-550 through a focus on material wealth, its handling, and its influence. The author demonstrates well how

this time period is crucial to explain the shifts that take place between "ancient" and "medieval" Christianity. He uses modern research, recently discovered texts, and archaeological evidence to question the prevailing narratives about the rise of prominence of Christianity in the Latin West and presents a more complex, nuanced, and ultimately more contextual and feasible explanation of that rise. The author analyzes both pagan and Christian views of wealth in late Roman antiquity, describes the major historical events immediately before the mid-fourth century, and then begins his analysis of the role of wealth as it impacted many of the disputations and personalities of Western Christendom from 350-550, including Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Pelagius, Paulinus of Nola, Salvian, and Gregory of Tours. The author convincingly demonstrates the process by which wealth eventually moved toward the church as the Roman empire disintegrated and how changes in the place of wealth and conceptions of giving in terms of penance and to the poor were major forces in the shift from "ancient" to "medieval" Christianity. The character studies of Ambrose and Augustine (as well as the rest of the major characters) are of excellent quality and quite instructive, firmly contextualizing the men not only as theologians but as full-fledged members of the late Roman world. This work is useful since it shows the social, political, and cultural dimensions of the major theological disputes regarding Augustinianism vs. Pelagianism, Catholics vs.

This is a searching and authoritative study of how early Christianity dealt with the problem of wealth. The scriptural position taken literally was uncompromising. It was harder for a rich person to enter heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle (Matthew 19:24). The rich were enjoined to give their wealth away and live a life of poverty. Brown in his work explores how Christian thinkers dealt with these teachings in a situation when many rich people began joining the Church, especially towards the end of the fourth century ACE when the religion had established itself as the dominant faith supported by the Imperial State. The narrative begins with the socio-economic context of the Fourth Century ACE. The century rather than being a period of decline was one of innovation and renewal when the Roman economy was newly monetised. The gold solidus introduced under Constantine proved to be a remarkably stable and long lasting currency which facilitated robust economic activity and the accumulation in specie of large fortunes. Although the basis of wealth remained land, the rich were able to convert agricultural wealth into gold. The top decile of Roman society comprising a small number of super rich and larger numbers of moderately wealthy were the beneficiaries of these favourable conditions and formed the imperial elite comprising both Italians and wealthy provincials, many of whom were "new men" who depended on and rose to social prominence and wealth as a result of imperial service and honours.

Power for them was readily converted into wealth. It was in this context that the Christian Church of the Fourth century found itself. At the time of the conversion of Constantine, the Church's social base lay amongst town folk from the middle levels of society.

Peter Brown is not only one of the foremost living scholars on the world of Late Antiquity; he is an excellent and joyous writer and travel companion. His career spans half a century, yet this book is repeatedly punctuated by his enthusiasm for the work of younger scholars whose writing has undermined Brown's own work and assumptions in many places. How many people near the end of a long and fruitful life are excited to find that they were often wrong? His writing always carries a balance of erudition and accessibility, serving both other scholars and lay people new to a field. I've been reading his work for years and have never come away disappointed. He has the ability to humanize figures and contexts from the ancient world like no one else. This book is in many ways a companion to his earlier brilliant survey, *The Body and Society*. The earlier work examined how Christianity's perspective on sexuality and bodily ascetism was shaped by Greco-Roman attitudes and practices in the 2nd-4th centuries. This volume, covering a later period of history, uses a similar method to examine the questions of wealth and poverty. As others have written here, each page holds its own "ah ha" moments. I have been researching this field for several years as part of my own scholarly work, yet Brown's book opened up new vistas on countless situations that I had previously thought I had already understood clearly. My reading list is also at least twenty volumes longer because of his excellent, engaging footnotes highlighting recent scholarship in five languages.

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