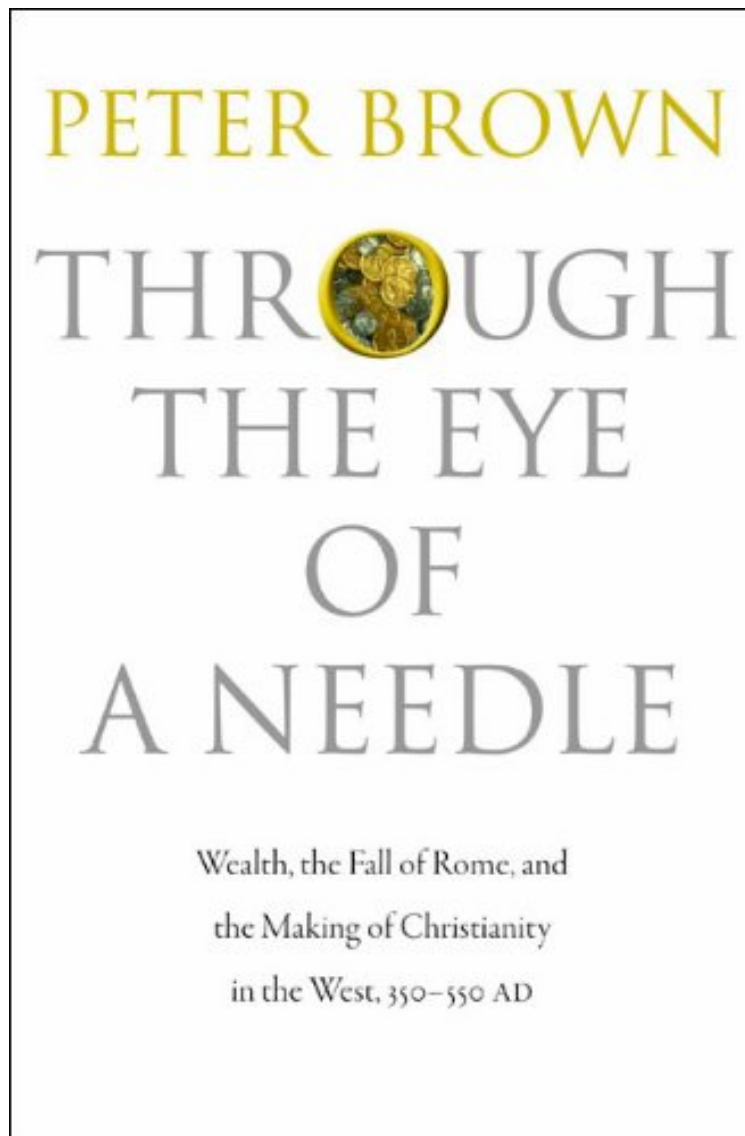


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Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD

Peter Brown

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skills are well known, and highly respected in New Testament studies and early Christian history. This work makes a fine addition to his already ample corpus. He has long been concerned with the transition of Christianity from an outsider early church to an institution of the Roman Empire, and he applies his very considerable knowledge to examine that transition with respect to the church's views on and use of wealth. For Orthodox Christians this book presents a serious challenge to those who like to think about poverty as an "option," rather than a norm. The material is presented in a fashion accessible to any reader, but could easily be used in settings ranging from a parish study class to a seminary. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Another magisterial work by Peter Brown. By Renee As a scholar of history, everyone knows the name of Peter Brown. It's quite impossible not to. He's one of the leading scholars in the field today. In this work, he has examined the role that wealth played in the evolution of the early Christian church. Particularly the notion of 'giving to the poor' and the notion that Christians can't be rich and good Christians. This is when many of the Christian notions we live by today came into being, and this book blow by blow examines them all. Anyone interested in this topic would do well to add this book to their collection. It's a thick volume, but well worth the investment in time and money to better understand the institution many of us turn to regularly. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. An exceptional book By Phil Gates This is a beautifully nuanced and insight-laden examination of the competing forces that shaped the social and religious mores of an important transitional time. Brown not only reveals ways in which wealth operated in the early centuries of the Christianizing West, but also provides a remarkably close up view of how wealth operates in any social context and thus provides valuable tools for thinking about how wealth, religion and the Church work in our own world.

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.

Winner of the 2012 Gold Medal Book of the Year Award, History category, ForeWord s Winner of the 2012 Award for Excellence in Humanities, Association of American Publishers Winner of the 2012 R. R. Hawkins Award, PROSE Awards, Association of American Publishers Winner of the 2013 Jacques Barzun Prize in Cultural History, American Philosophical Society Winner of the 2013 Philip Schaff Prize, American Society of Church History Winner of the 2012 PROSE Award in Classics Ancient History, Association of American Publishers One of Bloomberg's Best Books of 2016 One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2013 Honorable Mention for the 2013 Cundill Prize in Historical Literature, McGill University "To compare it with earlier surveys of this period is to move from the X-ray to the cinema. . . . Every page is full of information and argument, and savoring one's way through the book is an education. It is a privilege to live in an age that could produce such a masterpiece of the historical literature."--Garry Wills, *New York Times Book Review* "[O]utstanding. . . . Brown lays before us a vast panorama of the entire culture and society of the late Roman west."--Peter Thornemann, *Times Literary Supplement* "[I]t's the gloriously ambitious panorama of *Through the Eye of a Needle* that most impresses. This is a book written in Cinemascope, and like the best intellectual and social history it features a polyphony of voices."--Christopher Kelly, *London Review of Books* "[M]agisterial. . . . The formidably learned historian challenges commonly accepted notions about the role of wealth in the decline of the Roman empire and examines the roots of charity, two subjects relevant to contemporary economics."--Marcia Z. Nelson, *Publishers Weekly* "It is exciting to watch a historian who has already written so extensively on Late Antiquity absorb so much new scholarship, revise his old reviews, and re-imagine the world we thought we knew from him. . . . *Through the Eye of a Needle* is a tremendous achievement, even for a scholar who has already achieved so much. Its range is as vast as its originality, and readers will find everywhere the kinds of memorable aperçus and turns of phrase for which its author is deservedly famous. . . . There can be no doubt that we are in the presence of a historian and teacher of genius."--G. W. Bowersock, *New Republic* "As Brown (Augustine of Hippo), the great dean of early church history, compellingly reminds us in his magisterial, lucid, and gracefully written study, the understanding of the role of wealth in the developing Christian communities of the late Roman Empire was much more complex. Combining brilliant close readings of the writings of Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Paulinus of Nola with detailed examinations of the lives of average wealthy Christians and their responses to questions regarding wealth, he

demonstrates that many bishops offered such Christians the compromises of almsgiving, church building, and testamentary bequests as alternatives to the renunciation of wealth. . . . Brown's immense, thorough, and powerful study offers rich rewards for readers."--Publishers Weekly

"Brown's goal in this book is patiently to reconstruct the debates on wealth among late Roman Christians: in other words, to set out the context for the tendentious claims of ascetic minorities, which have misled so many later interpreters."--Conrad Leyser, *Times Literary Supplement*

"His sparkling prose, laced with humour and humanity, brings his subjects to life with an uncommon sympathy and feeling for their situation."--Tim Whitmarsh, *Guardian*

"This book should be daunting but it is not; for while the book is heavy to lift, it is even harder to put down. It makes utterly compelling reading."--Eric Ormsby, *Standpoint*

"Brown may be an emeritus professor of history at Princeton, but his research is resolutely up-to-date. . . . A hefty yet lucid contribution to the history of early Christianity."--Kirkus s "[A]n unprecedented resource. . . . Brown creates broad, deep landscapes in which the reader can watch the ancients moving. You can, in places, just crawl in and have a true dream about the ancient world. Moreover, the topic holds fascinating implications about the formation of modern Western culture. . . . It's a significant and suggestive story."--Sarah Ruden, *American Scholar*

"The sheer scope of this history is daunting, but scholars, theologians, and anyone interested in late Roman history or early Christianity will find this a fascinating view not only of the Church's development, but also of the changing concepts of wealth and poverty in the last centuries of the Roman empire."--Kathleen McCallister, *Univ. of South Carolina Lib., Columbia, Library Journal*

"This is a masterpiece that more than justifies its length. Peter Brown is the greatest living historian of late antiquity, a periodization which he virtually invented, and *Through the Eye of a Needle* an achievement which stands to his earlier career as a great cathedral does to a pilgrimage route."--Tom Holland, *History Today*

"[N]o other scholar could have produced Brown's characteristically intricate, spectacular and joyous synthesis. . . . One of the captivating qualities of Brown's new book is the sheer energy and intellectual excitement that sparkle through it. He might, in recent years, have rested of his laurels--perhaps, like his beloved Augustine, written his memoirs. Instead, he celebrates the continuing expansion of the field and demonstrates his continued mastery of it in a groundbreaking study of wealth in the late antique Church. . . . Towards the end of the book, Brown describes how a basilica might have looked around the year 600: glowing with candles, glittering with mosaics, gleaming with gold and silver vessels. 'The church itself', he says, 'had become a little heaven, filled with treasures.' It is a description irresistibly applicable to Peter Brown's own book: as rich a monument to the life of the mind as was any late Roman basilica to the life everlasting."--Teresa Morgan, *Tablet*

"[A] predictably brilliant re-appraisal of the Roman world during the fourth to sixth centuries. . . . *Through the Eye of a Needle* is a vast book, but is remarkably readable. Brown's intimate knowledge of Augustine and his times is presented with human empathy and a sense of the relevance of these long-ago events. . . . [T]he latter chapters of *Through the Eye of a Needle* contain much essential information about the establishment of Christian influence throughout Europe following Rome's fall. . . . [A] wonderful book."--Ed Voves, *California Literary*

"Peter Brown, professor emeritus at Princeton University and the leading historian of late antiquity, has written a masterful study. . . . His book is characterized by lively prose, mastery of the primary sources and original languages, comprehensive use of changes in the study of antiquities (especially the 'material culture' of archaeology), gorgeous plates, nearly 300 pages of bibliographic end material, and a number of important revisions to the standard historiography."--Dan Clendenin, *JourneywithJesus.net*

"*Through the Eye of a Needle* (Princeton University Press) is the crowning masterpiece of Peter Brown, the great historian who virtually invented late antiquity as a periodisation. The book's theme might seem specialised: the evolution of attitudes towards wealth in the last century and a half of the Roman empire in the west, and the century that followed its collapse. In reality, like so many of Brown's books, it gives us a world vivid with colour and alive with a symphony of voices. It is not only the most compassionate study of late antiquity in the west ever written, but also a profoundly subtle meditation on our own tempestuous relationship with money."--Tom Holland, *History Magazine*

"Brown, in this masterful history, makes the writings of Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome more accessible to the average reader, and scholars will welcome the voluminous notes and index."--Ray Saadi, *Gumbo*

"[D]eliriously complicated. . . . As usual, Brown leaves no stone unturned in his search for insight and evidence. . . . He paints a colorful social setting for early church debates about theology and ethics without becoming reductively sociological, and often overturns accepted mytho-history in the process. He quietly draws on contemporary theory but typically lets ancients speak for themselves because his aim is to introduce us to an exotic world. Through it all, he focuses on the masses of details by treating attitudes, beliefs, and practices about wealth as a 'stethoscope' to hear the heartbeat of late Roman and early Christian civilization. . . . Brown has captured the rough texture of real history. It is testimony to the success of Brown's subtle, provocative, and beautifully written book."--Peter Leithart, *Christianity Today*

"A fascinating book by the great historian of late antiquity, Peter Brown, on the development of Christianity in Rome. . . . *Through the Eye of a Needle* is a serious work of scholarship and an important study about how Rome became Christian."--John Roskam, Executive Director of the Institute of Public Affairs

"Thoroughly researched, making use of the new materials that have emerged in the recent years, *The Eye of the Needle* is a scholarly work not just on early Christianity but relates its growth to the later developments and offers a new reading of the old sayings. It definitely is a source book for readers on religion and society."--R. Balashankar, *Organiser*

"Its achievement is plain. It explores, with Brown's characteristically profound

empathy, the great paradox of how a church with a world- and wealth-denying ideology came to acquire temporal riches and respectability. . . . [H]is approach is to offer the reader extraordinarily vivid portraits of individual Christian thinkers faced with the moral contradictions of worldly riches. . . . This much anticipated book, described by Brown as 'the most difficult book to write that I have ever undertaken,' fulfils expectations. Its success is grounded in its unerring moral balance. Perhaps for the first time, the problem of wealth in early Christianity is treated in full, with no righteous fury at blatant hypocrisy nor any apology for a church that rationalized its enrichment by feeding the poor. . . . It is the virtue of *Through the Eye of a Needle* that it prompts and enables one to think about the largest questions. It is a gift to have such a beautiful, authoritative, and humane study that cuts to the heart of all that is most challenging in the relationship between the spiritual and the material in late antiquity."--Kyle Harper, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* "Brown . . . offers a masterful study on how converting to Christianity transformed the ways that economic elites in Europe and North Africa viewed their own wealth's source and purpose. A vivid storyteller, Brown transforms evidence from written, archaeological, and material sources into compelling portraits of early Christian leaders like Ambrose and Augustine. . . . [Through the Eye of a Needle] will quickly become required reading for students of early Christianity and late ancient history, but others interested in history and theological studies also will find it engaging."--Choice "Compelling. . . . One can see in Brown's narrative that the disputes of the fourth century stand between the old civic generosity and a new concern for otherworldliness. Perhaps that transitory radicality could not be sustained. But it has bequeathed to the church a 'conglomerate of notions' that link the wealth of the church, the care of the poor and the fate of the soul."--Walter Brueggemann, *Christian Century* "Peter Brown's achievement is not least in having placed us all in his debt with so rich a work. . . . [D]o not be put off by thinking that this is a book only for academics; all of us can enjoy what is, simply, accessible and well-written reading matter that does not require the possession of academic qualifications. It deserves to be enjoyed on the beach, as well as in the Bodleian!"--John Scott, *Fairacres Chronicle* "[B]oth masterful and friendly. . . . Through the Eye of a Needle, an important revisionary account for scholars of the ancient world, should also be read by a general public and by beginning undergraduates as an example of the humanity, the generosity, and the clarity of scholarship at its best."--Caroline Walker Bynum, *Common Knowledge* "Through the Eye of a Needle demonstrates Brown's mastery of an enormous range both of source material and of secondary work. It is crammed with stimulating ideas, and striking, very Brownian observations and metaphors. . . . Brown has taken us on a long and highly informative journey with numerous fascinating detours through late antiquity. We can only be grateful."--J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *American Historical Review* "Through the Eye of a Needle, an important revisionary account for scholars of the ancient world, should be read by a general public and by beginning undergraduates as an example of the humanity, the generosity, and the clarity of scholarship at its best. . . . It is both masterful and friendly."--Caroline Walker Bynum, *Common Knowledge* "[T]his book, like Brown's many others, has done [much] to illuminate the late-ancient world, and he has opened many avenues for others to continue exploring."--Michael Kulikowski, *Catholic Historical Review* "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."--World Book Industry "In typical fashion, Peter Brown has delivered a text that is masterly in scale, broad in scope, . . . and admirable in readability for a large audience."--M.A. Gaumer, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* "In addition to vast erudition formed by a range of reading in well over a dozen languages, Brown has something of the cinematographer's ability to compose a narrative by moving between panoramas and individual close-ups. The results are often dazzling."--Patrick Cook, *Cambridge Humanities Review* "[T]his is an impressive and monumental piece of scholarship that casts western late antiquity into clearer relief than it has received. It will long be required reading for anyone wanting to understand the social realities of Christianity in the late antique West."--Geoffrey D. Dunn, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* "Through the Eye of a Needle is Peter Brown at his best, his very best: a thoughtful and thought-provoking travel-guide whose beautiful prose opens up previously unseen horizons of real people living in a variety of landscapes around the Mediterranean at different moments in a period of epochal change that was fundamental for the making of Western European civilization. Using a fine brush and a light touch, Brown paints his pictures with a palette of an astonishingly broad and erudite up-to-date scholarship."--John Behr, *Marginalia* "[C]learly a magisterial achievement. Through the Eye of a Needle should be read by anyone interested in the late Roman Empire, ancient Christianity, or the complex origins of attitudes towards wealth and poverty in the modern world."--Benjamin H. Dunning, *European Legacy* "Through the Eye of the Needle will remain . . . as massive and reassuringly immovable landmarks in the horizon of our understanding."--Kate Cooper, *Journal of Roman Studies* "Elegantly written and amply sign-posted, this long book is a pleasure to read."--Alexander Skinner, *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* "Those readers interested in the evolution of the Western church or in a good social approach or both will find this book a splendid treatment. . . . This thorough work will become the standard go-to study of the early Christian church in the West."--Lee L. Brice, *The Historian* "Magisterial. . . . Brown's newest monograph belongs on the bookcase of every late ancient and medieval historian. . . . A stunning accomplishment."--Elizabeth DePalma Digesner, *H-Net* sFrom the Back Cover "Through the Eye of a Needle is a masterpiece of detailed historiography, brilliantly written. Peter Brown's long-awaited book surpasses even the high expectations set by his previous writings, and will engage general readers and specialists

alike."--Elaine Pagels, author of *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation*"Here Peter Brown listens to the heartbeat of the late Roman world. His report is a masterpiece that introduces us to the wealth and poverty of an empire as it implodes, and the inspiring Christian concept of treasure in heaven. Excavating the roots of medieval charity, he illuminates the problems of rich and poor today, and delivers a triumph of history at its finest."--Judith Herrin, author of *Byzantium: The Surprising Life of a Medieval Empire*"The gap between rich and poor is one of the major issues of today, and who better than Peter Brown to probe the acute problems of conscience it presented to late antique Christians? In this important book, he brings to this vital subject his characteristic wit, wisdom, and humanity, as well as the mature reflection of a great historian. It is a magnificent achievement."--Averil Cameron, author of *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity: AD 395-700*"Like a master mosaicist, Brown brings together a huge assemblage of sources to produce a vibrant panorama bursting with vitality. His story of the transfer of great wealth from rich individuals and families to the coffers of the church is the story of the creation of the postimperial West and the European Middle Ages. This is a big, and big-hearted, beautiful book. Tolle, lege."--Paula Fredriksen, author of *Sin: The Early History of an Idea*"This is a book that only Peter Brown could write. It has his trademark stamped all over it, in the richness of its source material, its breadth of coverage and turn of phrase, its fondness for the middling folk and outsiders who usually fall by the wayside of academic scholarship, and its insistence on seeing pagans and Christians as part of a larger, shared world."--H. A. Drake, author of *Constantine and the Bishops*"Peter Brown has written a book for the ages, one that every specialist throughout the world in late antique history and the history of Christianity will read. *Through the Eye of a Needle* is a remarkable work of scholarship--interesting, informative, original, and stimulating. I recommend it warmly and confidently."--Thomas F. X. Noble, author of *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*

About the Author Peter Brown is the Philip and Beulah Rollins Professor of History Emeritus at Princeton University. His many books include *The World of Late Antiquity*, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, and *Augustine of Hippo*.