

*The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*. Peter Brown. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780674967588

Peter Brown is authoritative. His prolific career has lost none of its initial relevance and is studded with impressive tomes that reconceptualized the periodization of the late Roman and early medieval eras. Primarily, he argues for a strong degree of continuity of Roman culture in a period many still consider to be the “Dark Ages.” Brown continues to bring to life in vivid, and often exciting, terms the social and philosophical world of early western Christianity in *The Ransom of the Soul*. Part of what makes Brown’s intellectual program consistent and distinct is his dismissal of the explanatory power of the “great events” of late antiquity, such as Constantine’s conversion or the barbarian invasions, privileging instead the subtle but transformative shifts in society that produced burning new questions and understandings about sin, God, and the afterlife. The question guiding this succinct and erudite study is why did Christians have such different imaginings of the afterlife in 250 and 650? Where did the image of a host of judging angels and torturing demons awaiting the recently deceased come from? This image is of no small importance, as Brown identifies it as central to the medieval imagination, its manifestations ranging from Romanesque portals to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. And why did the Romano-Frankish nobles of the early middle ages feel such a compulsion to spend extravagant wealth on behalf of the dead? Following in the vein of his previous book, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, Brown looks to answer the often overlooked question of *why* theological and imaginative understandings of the Christian afterlife changed from the third to the seventh centuries, paying close attention to the societal context that he argues was decisive in these changes.

With this rather *longue durée* framework in mind, Brown begins his book with a masterful juxtaposition of the writings of Cyprian of Carthage from the mid-third century with those of Julian of Toledo from the mid-seventh. Cyprian of Carthage wrote of only the most illustrious souls, in this context martyrs, ascending immediately to heaven much as any ancient pagan philosopher would have imagined great souls rising to the stars. The noblest souls left all others to an uncertain waiting time before God would remake all reality at Judgment Day, joining all souls as one in the Godhead. In contrast, Julian of Toledo was attentive to the fate of the individual soul, the average sinner who was neither very virtuous nor very evil, as he imagined a long journey fraught with danger, replete with supernatural beings judging each soul on its specific merits and faults before reaching its final destination. In this “twilight zone” the dead were in as much need of the living as the living were of the dead. Wealth played a central role in this relationship, easing the passage of the departed and securing goodwill on earth. This is what Brown calls the ransom of the soul, a phrase from Proverbs 13:8, that he believes captures the urgency of the afterlife and indicates the importance of wealth in linking the living with the dead. In Brown’s estimation, the emphasis on the fate of the individual soul not only made Latin Christianity distinct, but in fact constituted a new awareness of the self and marked the true beginnings of the middle ages.

How and why did this come about? Brown takes but five masterful chapters to answer this sprawling question. The first chapter, “The Memory of the Dead in Early Christianity,” establishes the roots of the concept “treasure in heaven” in early Christian thought that led to an associative coupling between the living and dead with the rich and poor, in which sinners could give to the poor to narrow the gulf between rich and poor, thereby narrowing the salvific gulf between heaven and earth. Chapters two and three, “Visions, Burial, and Memory in the Africa

of Saint Augustine,” and “Almsgiving, Expiation, and the Other World: Augustine and Pelagius, 410-430 AD,” chart the great theologian’s constant struggle with questions over the efficacy of rituals for the salvation of the *non valdes males et non valdes boni*, the average sinners neither very evil nor very good, who came to take a bigger place in Augustine’s writings. Reading Augustine in a new way, looking for the questions his parishioners asked him, and using sermons discovered only in 2009, Brown offers a fresh take on a thinker he knows so well. He places the theologian firmly in the urban, Roman context of Carthage and argues that while Augustine maintained a strictly immaterial view of the afterlife he did accept the expiatory nature of constant almsgiving by everyone. Habitual charity thus atoned for the inherent, daily sins of all mortals in Augustine’s response to Pelagius’ claims of attainable human perfection. Furthermore, Augustine conceived of a purging fire, “*ignis purgatorius*,” for the *non valdes*, the unexceptional sinners, an admission that created only more confusion for later Christians. Chapter Four, “Penance and the Other World in Gaul,” narrates how three churchmen, Salvian of Marseilles, Faustus of Riez, and Caesarius of Arles responded to the rise of church holdings in the hands of the super-rich in post-*imperium* Gaul of the sixth century. All three men stressed the need for immediate action for the increasingly self-aware Romano-Frankish nobility to give to the church for the salvation of the poor, with a concomitant rise in the belief in a Christian kingdom subject to the impending judgment of God. Augustine’s prescription for daily giving by all morphed into a dramatic challenge for the nobility to give away large chunks of wealth in a final, dramatic act of public penance. As God’s judgment in this world and the next intensified and the afterlife became more perilous in churchmen’s frenzied calls for immediate social reform, the imaginative barrier between living and dead became ever more permeable, as Brown argues in Chapter Five, “The Other World in this World: Gregory of Tours.” Brown links the

rise of episcopal authority to an increase of saints' powers of intercession, as bishops' saintly patrons became concrete actors in the mortal world, capable of defending the church's property with swift judgment. For Gregory of Tours, the difference between this world and the afterlife was not material and immaterial, but rather simply *hic* and *illic*, "here and there." The physical and spiritual worlds could not only affect each other, but had become dependent on each other's help for safety from immediate physical dangers. In his epilogue Brown at last explains the break between giving to the poor and giving to the church with reference to a shift away from the cities of Gregory's time to the elite, rural power bases that would characterize Francia for the next half millennium. Accompanying the decline of urbanity was the decisive rise of monasticism in the wake of Columbanus, the Irish reformer who popularized monasticism in Francia. The poor, with their links to the old traditions of the Roman city, had been the main intercessors for the rich in Augustine's time; now monks and nuns took their place as the intercessors par excellence. Brown argues that this "silent revolution" left behind a legacy "almost too big to be seen" in the increased importance of the individual sinner's fate, earned through a lifetime of minute sins and virtues (210, 205-6).

Not all will accept this narrative in its entirety, as it identifies a massive shift in western history, thought, and culture in the realm of religious imaginings of the afterlife. Yet the genius of *The Ransom of the Soul* is that it is never just about imaginings of the afterlife. It is about ancient Christian burial practices, the rhythms and customs of the ancient city, the anxieties of normal Christian men and women, the legacy of Augustine, early understandings of God's pardon, the integration of the Franks into Roman culture, apocalypticism in Gallic religious writings, the rise of monasticism, and the material circumstances of all his subjects. What is more, Brown links these subthemes to contemporary scholarship in these areas, connecting the

book to many other conversations and giving it the edges and complexity a work of this scope so dearly needs. His range of primary sources is nothing short of dazzling. Funerary inscriptions, the material evidence of burial practices, written evidence in Latin, Greek, and Coptic, and a seeming comprehensive command of most western Christian thinkers from 100 to 700 all lend credence to Brown's audacious, challenging claims. Furthermore, Brown writes with a humane eye towards his subjects, never denigrating their physical—to modern eyes perhaps crude, even vulgar—views of the afterlife and salvation but instead places them in the thoughts and deeds of rational human actors in a particular historical context. His splendid prose is not just succinct but in fact a joy to read. There is something in this book for any student of the premodern western world. At its most basic level, *The Ransom of the Soul* is a cogent, readable, historiographically weighty study of a shift in the western religious imagination. The book's brave, provocative claims about the greater course of history will force readers to at least reexamine their own beliefs about the nature of the individual in the west and the emergence of a distinctive medieval mindset. This alone earns *The Ransom of the Soul* nothing less than a wholehearted recommendation.

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