



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

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Jesus asserted it's easier for a camel to go thru 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 & 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.

Brown examines the rise of the church thru the lens of money & the challenges it posed to an institution that espoused the virtue of poverty & called avarice the root of all evil. Drawing on the writings of major Christian thinkers such as Augustine, Ambrose & Jerome, Brown examines the controversies & changing attitudes toward money caused by the influx of new wealth into church coffers, & describes the spectacular acts of divestment by rich donors & 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 & 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 & offers a fresh perspective on the social history of the church in late antiquity.

## **Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome & the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD Details**

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# **From Reader Review Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome & the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD for online ebook**

## **Jo Walton says**

Readable, insightful, thoroughly at home with his subject and truly interesting. I loved reading this and was sorry to finish it.

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## **Melora says**

This was fascinating. I didn't know much about the topic, but the author provided very adequate background regarding attitudes towards wealth in the late Roman Empire. The changes in Christian thought on wealth were well explained. The various people profiled were described in a very engaging way which illustrated the changing views on wealth over hundreds of years. My only complaint was that, as a non-expert, I was unfamiliar with the scholars the author frequently quoted, and also that the level of detail was a little excessive. Overall, though, this was very interesting, and I learned a lot!

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## **Siria says**

This is the kind of massive, authoritative tome that could only be produced after decades of intensive study. In *Through the Eye of a Needle*, Peter Brown looks at wealth and Christianity in the late Empire of the Latin West. He tracks how the collapse of centralised state authority, accompanied by a gradual fading of the idea of the *populus Romanus* as a living entity, allowed the Church to evolve into an institution built on corporate wealth. Wealth was given a higher purpose—not used simply to pay for bread and circuses, for entertainment in gilded buildings, it was now used to construct churches and monasteries full of light.

At several hundred pages, this will not be the book for anyone without a pre-existing interest in the history of wealth, patronage, or the development of the early Christian Church. While Brown writes fluidly and lucidly as always, this is densely written and very detailed, perhaps at times overly so. Still, this is a wonderful attempt at a recreation of a mindset at once very familiar and very alien, and I found it well worth the investment of time.

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## **Margaret Sankey says**

This is the kind of book for which the word magisterial was intended. I've been reading Brown's work on the late Roman Empire since undergraduate classes, and this is the culmination of immersion in the big ones-- Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose as well as the many congregants, faction leaders, bishops, donors and well-educated widows of the imploding Roman world. This book traces the fascinating process by which a church founded on humble poverty came to be an Imperial religion and then a replacement authority over the course of three hundred years in the west. Pre-Christian status through civic service and donations to public games

and temples guaranteed fame and Roman honor, which the new Christian ideas of donation to the poor and treasure in the next world significantly questioned. Gradually, as Roman law adjusted so that revocation of wealth took into account relatives, clients and standing obligations, becoming a monk or nun opened up new social and political leverage, especially for women and middling provincial nobles. Eventually, as the empire itself ebbed and the church accumulated property, bishops took on the administrative and authoritative mantle of Roman officials in the west, completing a process of cross-over unimaginable in the early centuries of the faith.

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## **Caracalla says**

High four. A simply Herculean effort of scholarship that perhaps lacks the coherence or ambition I thought it would have: I kinda wanted it to make good on its promise of explaining the formation of Modern views on wealth/materialism in at least a more obvious and precise way. Brown was on the other hand dealing with an absolutely massive corpus of material: the archaeology, the treatises, sermons and letters of Augustine, the sermons of Ambrose, Jerome's oeuvre, even the 900 letters of Symmachus (he's not too interested in the *Confessio/City of God* of Augustine but that's because they're not too evocative of praxis). The heart of the book is kinda microscopically focussed on things like the Pelagian controversy and Ambrose's episcopate and this focus makes things rather narrative. Brown is very shrewd in his account though, avoiding reading anything as 'inevitable,' and that definitely counts for something. Nothing I've read has given such insight into the Late Antique world also. I think other accounts suffer from focussing on broader periods. The issue of wealth brings us to a nexus of political and spiritual concerns that Brown makes very tractable. I think the scholarship on balance is very good and very engaging, unusually so. Not much I've read gets that balance between readability, technicality and precision as right as this, in fact almost nothing. I guess Late Antiquity is something i'll just have to pay more attention to, primarily through Brown's other works (and maybe Augustine himself).

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## **Ethan says**

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. Donatists, and even the late phase of the Arians vs. Trinitarians.

This is an excellent work of history and very worthwhile for anyone with an interest in the history of late antiquity and/or the development of Christianity and Christian doctrine.

\*\*--galley received as early review edition

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## **David says**

Way back when I was in college, and first learning about the history of the Christian church, there was a common refrain I heard: Constantine converted to Christianity, gave the Church privileges and the Church took over. I've read and heard the same thing over the years since. Constantine and his conversion is a sort of bogeyman for all sorts of people, especially those who desire a simplistic understanding of history that confirms their own suspicions (or moral superiority?).

For example, because Constantine endorsed the Trinity, it became doctrine. Except it didn't. In the years after Nicea, the Arians were winning. Constantine's successors (some of them) even favored Arians. The barbarians who conquered the western empire were Arians (and for the record, lest anyone accuse me of hypocrisy, I recognize the barbarians were not as barbaric as we might think and that story too is more complex).

In this book, Peter Brown tells a complex story. The common story of wealth is that once Constantine converted, the churches became rich and privileged. Brown shows that for whatever privilege they got, riches did not immediately follow. It was a much slower process. Further, it was fraught with conflict. Many Christians would have argued that the only thing to do with wealth was to renounce it! How did the church handle its growing wealth? In telling this story, we also read the story of a transition from Late Antiquity into the Early Medieval era.

This is a thorough book. There is so much here. Its not the sort of book for people new to history; you probably want an elementary grasp of the era. The benefit here is that Brown shows that the "western empire" was not monolithic. Things were different, and how wealth was handled by Christians, was different from Rome to Gaul to Carthage. We take for granted that Augustine's theology, and view of wealth, triumphed. But in the background (or even foreground) of his battle with Pelagius was a battle over how to handle wealth.

Augustine's view won out. Brown shows that there was little concern with where the wealth came from. The question for the Christian was how to use the wealth. This echoes down to today as Christians are called to give generously. Until recently, there was not much concern in the Church with where your wealth came from (except for extreme cases). It'd be interesting to read a book, a sort of sequel, for when Christians began to show more concern for how one gets wealth. You don't have to be a Marxist to wonder about human trafficking in the global supply trade. The growing concern for fair trade and fair pay for workers might reveal a shift away from what took route after Augustine.

The other thing sticking in my mind was how the Roman mindset influenced the church. In Roman times not all poor were equal. There were the deserving poor, the people who were citizens of the city. We might call them something similar to middle class today. These were the people who received handouts from the government in Rome. Then there were the lower poor, the ones who might be kicked out of the city of Rome when things got tough. I did not realize there was such a division before, but it does strike me how this plays into how we read ancient sources. Find a text from 200-300 AD that speaks of helping the poor. Who were these poor? We can't take for granted we know exactly who they were speaking of.

Overall, this is a pretty great book for people into history and a Christian worldview.

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## **Gary says**

With this book you will learn something you did not already know and more importantly discover things you believed to be true but probably weren't true. Whether the nature of the Roman town structure, the elite, the distribution of wealth within the republic, the rise of the Christians after Constantine, or why 'most Idealist thinkers [Enlightenment and Romantic] were Pelagians' (that's a quote from 'Culture and the Death of God', by Terry Eagleton) most readers will learn things they didn't know and even better will unlearn things they thought to be true but weren't.

This is a smart book with a narrative tying a complex story together coherently. How we understand history and interpret it is always changing. As history is being written it is using the beliefs at the time which were depended on the prior beliefs and filtered by the expectations of what's currently happening. A great historian such as Peter Brown knows this and has a way of telling the story such that he will almost certainly destroy the false beliefs you had about this incredibly interesting period of time, the Roman Empire from 350-550 AD and provide a new narrative to understand that world (after all, who among us doesn't love Roman History from this time period? I know I do, and I know this book stripped away many of my false beliefs about the period that I used to have but no longer do because of this book).

The author realizes how we thought about our world determines how we presently think about our world and also will frame how we see the world in the future as well as our now. The particular can determine the general and the specific or in the terms the author is speaking about, the Roman citizen will love his city and the citizen will be part of the Empire. Similarly, the Church will redefine itself through its members and grow beyond the local Bishop and become a universal ('catholic') church even though universal at first meant anyone was allowed to join it not that it was everywhere as the word 'Catholic' now connotes.

Augustine of Hippo is at the center of this story. Before him the thought even among Christians and some Pagans would have been 'If there were no rich there would be no poor' (because the rich only exist off the sweat of the poor) after Augustine and because of him it becomes 'eliminate pride then the rich would be justified'. Augustine, according to the author, takes Cicero's civic duty and combines that with Plotinius' metaphysics and the teachings of St. Paul and makes a religion. Pelagius will say, prayers make a difference, we aren't born in sin, we have free will, and that the rich need to share their wealth with the poor. Augustine and his later allies will say differently. This book will delve into those kinds of things and more. It will take St. Aquinas 850 years later to reverse the Augustinian trajectory and then Martin Luther (and Calvin) to reverse course again by valuing faith over works and letting us all know that we are born in sin because of Adam's pride and defiance.

The writer is not always a fluent writer, but he has a narrative that really works and it would be a rare person

who could read this book and not learn something new and worth knowing about and more importantly unlearn something they thought they knew but were wrong about.

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### **Adam Shields says**

Short Review: Long, but interesting look at the variety of ways that the church of the Late Roman Empire looked at wealth and how it should be used. Interesting to reflect in the different ways we currently think about wealth. My knowledge of the history of this period is pretty weak. But Brown does take some alternative views from others that I have read. His understanding of Augustine (especially around celibacy and Augustine's desire to turn all clerics into monks) is different from what I read in Augustine: A Very Short Introduction and some of his history on the rise of the church countered Rodney Stark's The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion. This did not make a huge difference to the main point of the book, but it always does make me pause to realize that I just have to take the author's word on so many things that I can't independently verify. That being said, I think his take on Augustine makes more sense than in the Very Short Introduction and Stark was really taking a pretty broad view and Brown is more of a narrow look.

Click Through for the full review on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/through-the-eye-of-a...>

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### **Peter Mcloughlin says**

What is interesting about Christianity is that it is the first universalist ideological movement to take over an empire. It was also anti-materialist and many of Jesus teachings were against the rich and worldly wealth. Being an ideological movement it was prey to doctrinal dispute. Obviously, these doctrinal disputes were entangled in earthly wealth and power dynamics. No matter how otherworldly we claim to be we must contend with worldly affairs if we are to have an effect on them so the dynamics of power are going to play in these disputes no matter how ethereal appearing they seem. One of the issues was the place of the wealthy in the movement. Early on when the movement appealed to outsiders it could easily dismiss the wealthy as heading to perdition but as the movement grew and gained wealthy and powerful adherents the antimaterialist doctrine inevitably had to be modulated. This early anti-materialist banner was taken up by the Pelagians but had to be moderated by thinkers like Augustine who had to deal with the world's influence on Christian affairs and Augustine shifted the ire from wealth to pride which helped with this impediment to a growingly wealthy and powerful church. Meanwhile, the worldly Roman Empire was also imploding around this time which added to the complexity of the intellectual environment of the growing Christian Church. Definitely, this ideology was seasoned with some rough weather which made it ever so durable.

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### **Chad says**

A fascinating look at the last centuries of the Roman empire through the perspective of wealth. While the power and influence of the Roman empire waned, the relative influence of the Church grew. Associated with it was also wealth. Both power and money changed the way the church operated.

The book examines these topics through a fascinating cast of characters-- names familiar to me, but ones that

I have never encountered up close. You get to know Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, using his critique of the poor as a power play with the imperial government. You get to learn how a young Augustine, supported by a local patron, tried to climb the imperial ranks, associated with an extreme sect the Manichees, and eventually settled down to form a monastery in Roman Africa. You hear of his clash with Pelagius about free will, but also how the role of wealth factored in. The Pelagians denounced wealth, and thought that it should be renounced. Augustine was more moderate, and thought you could be rich and put your money to good use. You learn how Paulinus of Nola used his wealth primarily to build up a shrine to his favorite saint, Felix, creating a distinct sink of wealth separate from caring for the poor. You learn how Christian bishops were concerned of the competition associated from the Roman games for money from wealthy donors.

I feel much more comfortable with figures in early Christianity after reading this book, as well as some of the historical complexities associated with them. It also gave insights into modern-day problems associated with churches, the secular, and wealth. These problems aren't new.

When they entered a Christian basilica, the rich were exposed to the gaze of a crowd of hundreds drawn from all classes, many of whom might have good reason to resent them. It was a venue more claustrophobic than was the amphitheater in which the notables of the city had long faced their "people." In this situation, a bishop not only spoke out to defend the poor. He also had it in his power either to shame or to shield the rich. (143) The environment the rich faced when entering the Christian church.

Ambrose's sermons on the wealthy should not be read as a reportage on the actual state of Milanese society. Nor were they intended in themselves to bring about a program of social reform. What they did do was open up for Ambrose and for similar Christian bishops a space for intervention in society. The sermons were no more than the preliminary bombardment that preceded the action of the bishop as an intercessor with the great. (144) Sermons condemning the wealthy were in essence a power play.

"Advocacy revolution" and "a culture of criticism": It had not come about because of a heightened sense of concern for the oppressed but had been fostered by the imperial government for brutally practical reasons. Perched at the top of an immense and slow-moving bureaucracy, the emperor and his court went out of their way to encourage appeals and denunciations from below. As in the Soviet Union, the emperors realized that "the real power of a totalitarian state results from its being at the disposal of every inhabitant." Lethal denunciations could come from anywhere." (144) Do these tactics not sound familiar in our our political culture?

For [Augustine], human society was not held together by some massive, original bond. It depended for its cohesion on the perilous free play of human affections. Each friendship was a gamble. Each human group was the fragile creation of an interplay of wills. Society was a risky business. Whatever solidarity it managed to create depended on the subtle flow of shared affections and loyalties. [155] I have been feeling similar sentiments in my own experience in academia. It all seems like a gamble based on who you know.

Like many Christian intellectuals, Augustine tried hard not to look down on clergymen. But it was difficult not to do so. As we have seen, the clergy were generally persons of middling or lower status. They did their job in shepherding the masses. But, in Augustine's opinion in 388, this left them with little time to pursue the philosophical wisdom that truly healed the soul. [171] Intellectual hubris, something I'm not immune to myself.



On the distinctly Roman aristocratic Christ: The Christ of Ambrose and of Paulinus was by no means the humanized Christ of later medieval and modern piety. He was very much a late Roman Christ. His humility was all the more stunning because it was based upon a conscious act of self-effacement on the part of the majestic God whom He continued to be. The splendor of God had dimmed itself in an awesome gesture of condescension. If, in the late Roman social imagination, power and wealth were things that had to be asserted in order to exist, then no abjection, no “stepping down,” could be more stunning than the “stepping down” by which God himself had abandoned, for a time, His assertion of power. Christ, as God, had been the aristocrat of aristocrats, the wealthiest of the wealthy. Yet out of His immense goodness and of His own free will, He had renounced this wealth. [222]

Why was this remorseless logic of crime and punishment so important to Salvian? It was because, at the back of Salvian’s mind, there lay a lingering conviction that, in some way or other, the Roman empire was the Israel of modern times. Like the ancient Israel, it was a rare state subject to the peculiar care of God. This fact conferred a state of privilege on the inhabitants of the surviving territories of the empire. But it also laid a heavy responsibility upon them. [442]

“The Romana republica is now dead... strangled as if by thugs, with the bonds of taxes.” [448]

[On rich Romans taking advantage of poorer Romans by taking title to their lands] “Salvian had no objection to patronage in itself... But to turn a free client into a slave in this way went against the whole grain of his view of society. As we have seen, the Gallic consensus on theology had assumed a view of society that accepted sharp asymmetries as long as the partners remained free agents. The relation of patron and client provided the root metaphor for the relations between God and human beings... Dependence on God was not the same thing as slavery.” [449]

In the Gaul of the early sixth century, to reassure monks that they could be bishops meant persuading them that the wealth of the church had come to stay. It was there. The only issue was how to deal with it. Pomerius went out of his way to prove that involvement with the wealth of the church need not pollute them or detract from their spiritual life. It was possible to be both a contemplative and an administrator. [485]

Regarding the rise of “managerial bishops”: Yet none of these advantages could be taken for granted. They had to be fought for. What the situation demanded was a bishop who was prepared to take the offensive. First, he had to have skilled lawyers at his disposal in order to hold onto what he received... Hence, the importance of the emergence of a new figure in the landscape of wealth—the rise of what may best be called “the managerial bishop.”[497]

As givers, the laity came to insist that the clergy should be clearly other to themselves. If they were not, gifts to the churches would not work for the relief of the sins of the givers. [517]

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## **Carol says**

Sometimes it is best to contemplate current difficulties from the perspective of the past. Better than any I've read, this book unravels the tangled threads of spirituality and money, showing us, from the vantage of late Rome, that in times of cultural collapse, people put their faith in wealth and the illusions of control it affords.

For those of you who have not read Brown, he is perhaps the finest historian of late Rome and the rise of

Christianity. He recreates for us the lives and perplexities of real people living their daily lives in the ancient world. It's thick and scholarly, but I cannot recommend him highly enough.

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## **Clif Hostetler says**

This book provides a virtual time-machine fly through of the Western Roman Empire from 350 to 550 AD with special attention being given to the ways in which the Christian Church dealt with wealth. This is a problem for the Christian religion because it is based upon the teachings of Jesus who is quoted in the New Testament as saying that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter heaven. For the first three hundred years of Christian church history there was no significant problem in interpreting the meaning of this statement because Christian membership generally consisted of urban artisans and trades people of the lower classes. They certainly didn't consider themselves to be rich, and they had no difficulty in saying that rich people in this world wouldn't go to heaven in the next world.

Things began to change in 312 when Constantine gave favored status to the Christian Church. Today we generally imagine that things suddenly changed when Constantine came to power. However these changes were more complicated than perceived today and they were stretched out over many years. Constantine set in motion changes that allowed ambitious Christians with their favored status to start becoming the "new rich" while the older established aristocratic rich remained Pagan. It wasn't until long after Constantine's death that wealth began coming into the Church in a significant way.

"It was the gathering pace of the entry of the rich into the Christian Churches in the period after 370, and not the conversion of Constantine in 312, that marks the true beginning of the triumphant Catholicism of the Middle Ages."

This book makes use of recent archaeological findings to modify conclusions reached by much of previous 20th Century scholarship on the subject of church history in this era. At almost every point regarding history of this era, the new understanding is more complex and varied than previously understood.

This book traces the long process of changes that took place between the years 350 to 550. It begins with a hesitant age following the conversion of Constantine in 312 AD, when the Christian churches of the West became privileged. But they had not become wealthy. Only in the last quarter of the fourth century did wealthy people enter the church in growing numbers, often stepping into leadership roles as bishops and as Christian writers. It was the entry of new wealth and talent into the churches from around 370 onward which marks the turning point in the Christianization of Europe. From then onward, as members of a religion that had been joined by the rich and powerful, Christians could begin to think of the possibility of a totally Christian society.

But this new wealth brought problems. There was conflict between the old believers, new believers, old wealth, and new wealth. Between around 370 and 430 there was an explosion of writing on the subject of wealth, associated with writers and preachers such as Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Paulinus of Nola, and the supporters of Pelagius. There was good reason for this explosion. In the Christian church of the time, distinctive traditions of giving and attitudes toward wealth reached back to before the age of Constantine. They were often associated with low-profile styles of leadership that drew their support from distinctly average congregations. These low-profile styles of giving and leadership frequently clashed with the expectations of those brought into the churches by the wealthy.

Ironically, once the churches became used to being affluent by the end of fourth and early fifth century they

needed to learn how to live in an impoverished world once the Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century. Radical critiques of wealth were then abandoned and instead emphasis was placed on how wealth could be used to consolidate the Christian community.

“...The greatest surprise of all occurred in the late fifth century. The leaders of the churches realized that they--and not the great lay landowners whose fortunes had previously dwarfed the wealth of the church--were, at last, truly wealthy. The collapse of the traditional aristocracies left the church in a unique position.”

Through it all the church managed to maintain a sense of the collective nature of the wealth of the faithful for the purpose of care for the poor.

The main point of this book was not to discuss the cause of the fall of the Roman Empire. However, I was interested to see how this author addressed the subject. He says it was caused by civil war among Roman generals fighting each other in an effort to make themselves Caesar. These wars raged for a generation throughout Britain, Gaul, Spain, and Africa. The various competing Roman generals actually invited barbarian armies to fight for their side. The barbarians were paid by allowing them to plunder the invaded areas. In the end the barbarians found themselves in control of large areas that were then independent of any loyalty (or taxes) to Rome. With depleted revenue from taxes the central Roman government was no longer able to maintain an army to retake control of the lost provinces. From this description I have concluded that the fall of the Roman Empire was not caused by the rise of the Christianity at the cost of the traditional ways of the Pagans as was suggested in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

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### **Ana says**

Muy recomendable. Un libro que te hace caer en la cuenta cómo cambia la relación con el dinero y la riqueza para aquellos que en Roma abandonan los ídolos para hacerse cristianos. Un camino que viene narrado maravillosamente por el autor a lo largo de varios siglos.

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### **Mason says**

This is an exquisitely dense study of the shift in the Mediterranean world of the Roman empire to the early hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church.

Before reading it I had some vague knowledge that Romans partied themselves to death and then Constantine decided he was a Christian and everyone lived happily ever after ( or at least saved).

The story of this book is much more rich. Not only does Brown show a wide range of personalities and philosophies at their steady work, he quietly reminds us that a little revolution here and there can make for a whole lot of change everywhere.

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