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- Title** Review of *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity*, by Peter Brown
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for this neglect may be reticence to reduce deity entirely to human cognition (see the epilogue).

Despite these concerns, Smith offers a novel and informed approach to the study of the conceptualization of deity in *Where the Gods Are*, and we need more of it. The book engages a number of important issues related to the study of ancient conceptualizations of the God of Israel, and Smith forwards a compelling theory regarding the relationship of the deity's representation to its ritual, material, and political embeddedness. Future inquiry into that relationship will hopefully be catalyzed by this book. The engagement with spatiality and the cognitive sciences also represents a significant step forward among popular books in promoting a more multidisciplinary approach to biblical studies.¹⁶

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IN *THE RANSOM OF THE SOUL*, Peter Brown explores how early Christians conceptualized the relationship between wealth and the afterlife. He limits his study primarily to the writings of Christian authors living

16. Scholarly publications with more thorough integrations of the two fields are available, such as István Czachesz and Risto Uro, eds., *Mind, Morality and Magic: Cognitive Science Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), but none so far with the reach of Mark S. Smith or the Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library.

in the Latin West between 250 and 650 CE and traces the evolution of the idea that “heaven and earth could be joined by money” in such a way as to affect the fate of souls after death (p. ix). Brown situates these developing discourses within their socioeconomic context and asks, How, when, and why did variations occur? How long did they take? And to what extent do they represent departures from previously established Christian or non-Christian religious systems? He argues that gradual changes in the social and economic context of the Western church were “reflected in changes in Christian representations of the other world and in the religious practices connected with the death and afterlife of Christian believers” (p. ix).

In chapter 1, Brown traces the roots of religious giving in Christianity and Judaism to the Old and New Testaments. For Christians, Jesus’s instruction to the rich young man to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor in order to have “treasure in heaven” was foundational to the notion that money could function as a bridge between the earthly and heavenly worlds. The earliest Christians believed that they could “build their own mansions using the funds they transferred to heaven through acts of charity on earth” (p. 27). Beginning in the second century, a time when few Christians were wealthy, Christians in Rome understood almsgiving to be consonant with other acts of communal solidarity, such as communal prayer (on behalf of the living and the dead), funeral celebrations, and memorial meals. These practices were understood to reflect God’s care for humanity and intended, as Brown notes, “to join a series of mighty incommensurables—God and man, heaven and earth, rich and poor, living and dead” (p. 42).

As the gap between the rich and poor increased in the third century onward, Christian attitudes toward alms and the afterlife evolved. The dead, who were previously viewed as partners in prayer, came to be seen more as patron saints and intercessors between believers and God, while almsgiving was understood less as a practice of social cohesion and more as one of expiation of sin that involved little or no direct interaction with the poor. Thus, both the poor and the dead were increasingly seen as “other.” Furthermore, because the wealthy could give alms

on a much larger scale than those of a lower social class, the efficacy of such devotions was most fully realized in the lives of these elite, who were understood to undergo a more immediate ascent into heaven. The souls of average Christians, however, were imagined to “travel more slowly and at ever-greater risk—past demons and through flames of fire—toward an increasingly distant heaven” (p. 46). Also during this era, discussions arose regarding the efficacy of practices performed on behalf of the dead. Mani, for example, held that rituals such as alms, love feasts, prayer, and the Eucharist could help the dead “find rest” and avoid the hostile powers along their journey in the afterlife, while Augustine argued that such was only the case for the dead who were neither “altogether good (*valde boni*)” nor “altogether bad (*valde mali*).” The altogether good dead were assumed not to need aid to reach heaven while the altogether bad were unredeemable (p. 54).

Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to the writings of the North African bishop and theologian Augustine. Chapter 2 turns to Augustine’s views on the living’s access to the other world through dreams and visions, burial practices, and the bond between the living and dead. Questions regarding these topics emerged primarily from the anxieties of the wealthy in his own community as well as from his interactions with Evodius of Uzalis, Paulinus of Nola, and the Donatists. Augustine discouraged speculation concerning what could be known about the dead and argued that dreams and so-called visions of the afterlife and the deceased revealed little reliable information about the hereafter. During Augustine’s tenure as bishop, the elaborate tombs of the wealthy began to crowd the graves of the martyrs in North Africa because in the minds of these Christians, “the quiet presence of the saint did not only guarantee protection on the Day of Judgment, it was said to lighten the darkness of the tomb” (p. 79). As Brown notes, the exorbitant cost of these burials ensured that “‘holy space’ was blatantly the space of the rich” (p. 79). Augustine denied the efficacy of such practices and reemphasized his commitment to the traditional rituals performed on behalf of the deceased: prayer, almsgiving, and offering at the Eucharist, all of which could be performed by rich and poor alike (p. 80).

The third chapter situates Augustine's views on almsgiving within the context of his exchanges with his Pelagian opponents in the early fifth century. Following the sack of Rome in 410, Pelagius and his wealthy patrons fled to Carthage as refugees and brought with them their own notions of sin, free will, and wealth (p. 93). Pelagius advocated for the total renunciation of wealth as a means to a perfect life, which view threatened Augustine's presentation of almsgiving as a regular and dependable way to care for the poor, support the clergy, and finance the building and maintenance of churches. Augustine's understanding of alms also allowed for the wealthy to retain much of their wealth and therefore their social status. Furthermore, Augustine argued that all Christians were obliged to give alms because to do so also had an expiatory function, a view that would prove influential for centuries to come (p. 96). Countering Pelagius's claim that humans inherently possessed the capacity for a sinless life, Augustine argued that post-lapsarian humanity was in constant need of forgiveness, and thus perpetual almsgiving could function as the counterpart of perpetual sin (p. 100). In contrast to traditional models of civic euergetism in Roman society, in which the wealthy spent money only on their own city in order to provide comfort and entertainment for their fellow citizens, Augustine preached that Christians should give indiscriminately to all in need (pp. 87–88). Moreover, while Roman acts of giving were often performed with the intent to glorify the wealthy patron and his or her family, Augustine understood almsgiving as a way to demonstrate the sins of the giver. Because all were sinners, all Christians, whether rich or poor, could give.

In the early 420s, Augustine was faced with the question of whether the process of expiation would continue after death. Relying upon 1 Corinthians 3:14–15, he insisted that those who had unresolved (and trivial) sins were not destined to hellfire but would experience a brief period of purgation (a "purging fire") before the final judgment (p. 107). While Augustine did not specify the duration of this purifying process, he argued that the prayers and offerings of the living would be most effective during this time. Brown notes that Augustine was hesitant

to theorize at length about this period of purgation and reports that “he spoke of it always with the reticence of a scientist who realizes that he made a discovery that might be used to create a devastating secret weapon” (p. 110). Augustine’s views ultimately served to lay the groundwork for the more robust views of purgatory that characterized the Middle Ages.

Chapter 4 looks north to the writings of several Christian authors living in Gaul in the later fifth and sixth centuries, including Salvian of Marseilles, Faustus of Riez, and Caesarius of Arles. The Gallic churches at this time found themselves in somewhat different circumstances than Augustine’s North African congregations. On the one hand, Gallic Christians were in a state of social disruption brought about by a combination of barbarian invasion and civil war; on the other, the leadership of the church in Gaul consisted primarily of the local aristocracy—that is, Christians of immense inherited wealth who often linked their episcopal authority to their secular status. Brown argues that the development of a sense of the “looming prospect of the Last Judgment” pervades fifth- and sixth-century Gaul and that prior to this period, wealth and the afterlife had never been “brought together in so menacing a manner” (pp. 119, 149). Salvian and Caesarius invoked images of hellfire and demons to persuade the rich to donate their wealth to the church as penance for sin. Faustus similarly advocated for the contemplation of one’s sins, hell, and punishment as an educational program for the rich. His materialist understanding of the soul allowed for a literal understanding of eternal torment, something that served his rhetorical purposes well. Furthermore, Faustus emphasized that Christians were not slaves to God but clients who could freely choose to act in his service. They could not, however, choose to be free of sin. Penance through alms, therefore, was a way that God worked through the body of Christ to redeem souls from sin and attend to the temporal welfare of the poor.

The wealthy elite during this period were encouraged to make a public display of their penance as a way to demonstrate the level of their conversion to God and to mark the total renunciation of their previous

aristocratic lives and the inauguration of their new lives, often as bishops and monks. As in the North African churches, growing practices of burial *ad sanctos* (burying the dead in close proximity to the holy deceased) among the rich betrayed a fear of the immediacy of death and the afterlife. Finally, throughout the sixth century, Brown sees the emergence of a “religious governmental mood,” most discernable in the public proclamations of the Frankish kings and bishops, who understood it as their duty both to restore order after the fall of the Western Empire and to suppress public sinning (p. 144). Laws and practices geared toward accomplishing this end began to appear, including the imposition of fines on rich sinners, the flogging of peasants and slaves for unethical conduct, an emphasis on group penance, and the suppression of paganism and Judaism. As the Frankish kings proclaimed themselves the head of the church community, one consequently sees the emergence of the notion of a Christian kingdom with a strong emphasis on repentance (p. 147).

Moving into the latter half of the sixth century, chapter 5 explores Gregory of Tours’s understanding of the “intrusions of the other world in the here and now” (p. 181). For Gregory, the miracles performed at the tombs and shrines of the saints, especially that of St. Martin, proved not only the reality of the afterlife but that the righteous dead were fully active in this world and in the other. As Brown argues, Gregory was distinctive in “the intensity with which he insisted that the other world breaks in upon the human race also in our time” (p. 167). Bishops like Gregory during this postimperial period no longer traced their authority to their aristocratic background but to their role as representatives of these miracle-working saints. Gregory understood the soul’s passage into the next life to be long and fraught with danger, and thus intercessory prayer, especially from holy persons, was necessary for the dead to pass by the “demonic checkpoints” and into the presence of God (p. 162). In contrast to Augustine, who believed that there was little anyone else could do to affect the state of the dead, Gregory held a robust notion of the interdependency of the living and the dead. Those who gave alms to the poor and other monetary devotions to the church

did so with the intent of gaining the prayers of the saints in order that devotees' souls might be healed and protected in preparation for the final judgment.

Brown concludes the book with an epilogue that discusses the monastic movement inaugurated by Columbanus in sixth- and seventh-century Gaul. He argues that Columbanus's monastic ethos of openness, humility, mutual respect, and frequent confession heavily influenced the Frankish elite, helping to create a "code of upper-class decorum" that drew on religious ideology in addition to classical rhetoric and Roman law (p. 194). Consequently, the monasteries and convents of the Frankish kingdom came to form a symbiotic relationship with these wealthy Christians who sought to assure the safety of their souls in the afterlife through alms. This period of time saw a departure from previous attitudes toward alms and the other world in that the role previously played by the poor as intercessors par excellence was now filled primarily by living monks and nuns whose ascetic status gave their prayers special power. Furthermore, a new genre of literature emerged that recounted stories of near-death experiences and the voyage of the soul in the afterlife, offering more robust visions of the other world than ever before. Significantly, God and the final judgment were absent from these stories; rather, the focus seemed to be on the in-between, postmortem state before judgment. One sees similar emphasis on the unresolved sins of the individual dead and on the fate of soul vis-à-vis intermediate powers like angels and demons who could be influenced by the prayers of monks and nuns. The flowering of this new monastic culture and the emergence of this new genre of literature were foundational to the conceptualization of religious giving and the afterlife in the medieval West for centuries to come.

Readers will find *Ransom of the Soul* useful not least because Brown successfully portrays the ways in which wealth functioned as a conduit for linking the living and the dead. Methodologically speaking, he is to be commended for offering a more nuanced historical portrait of the early church than the traditional master narratives of the past, which tended to be heavily influenced by the theological commitments of their authors (e.g., Étienne Chastel and Gerhard Uhlhorn) and focus on *what*

happened rather than *why*.¹ In a short 211 pages, his careful attention to the social and economic context of the late ancient West serves to highlight the interconnectivity of theological reflection in the church and the socioeconomic realities in which it occurs. Additionally, the scope of the book expands the purview of previous scholarship on the topic, which has tended to center on late Roman Italy (e.g., C. Pietri and J. Harries).² He navigates his source materials with ease and his graceful and accessible prose contributes to his persuasive line of reasoning, which arguably brings to fruition the work begun by Boniface Ramsey in the early 1980s.³ Finally, Brown's exposition of the relationship between wealth and the afterlife in *Ransom of the Soul* complements his previous work, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (2013), in which he explores evolving discourses on wealth and poverty as they pertain to this world. Together they comprise an impressive resource for understanding Christian attitudes toward wealth during the decline of the Western Empire.⁴ *Ransom of the Soul* also heavily resonates with David Downs's recent work on alms, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity* (2016), which explores the relationship between almsgiving and atonement for sin in early Christianity, although with attention to Eastern authors of the first three centuries CE.⁵

1. Étienne Chastel, *Études historiques sur l'influence de la charité durant les premiers siècles chrétiens* (Paris: Capelle, 1853); Gerhard Uhlhorn, *Die christliche Liebestätigkeit in der alten Kirche* (Stuttgart: Gundert, 1882).

2. C. Pietri, "Les Pauvres et la pauvreté dans l'Italie de l'Empire chrétien (IV^e siècle)," in *Miscellanea Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 6, Bibliothèque de la Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique 67 (Brussels: Louvain Publications, 1983), 267–300; "Evergétisme et richesses ecclésiastiques dans l'Italie du IV^e à la fin du V^e siècle: L'Exemple romain," *Ktema* 3 (1978), 317–37; J. Harries, "Treasure in Heaven: Property and Inheritance among Senators of Late Rome," in *Marriage and Property*, ed. E. M. Craik (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984), 54–70.

3. Boniface Ramsey, "Almsgiving in the Latin Church: The Late Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries," *Theological Studies* 43 (1982): 226–59.

4. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

5. David J. Downs, *Alms: Charity, Reward, and Atonement in Early Christianity* (Baylor: Baylor University Press, 2016).

My critiques of Brown's work are few. First, while his rhetoric is evocative, his source materials are few and primarily literary. In a book that explores Christian views of the afterlife, I would have appreciated more epigraphic and archaeological evidence, especially as they pertain to the burial and commemoration of the dead. The analysis in chapter 1 of the graffiti at San Sebastiano and Brown's later brief mention of the practice of burial *ad sanctos* are welcome and insightful but leave the reader wanting more. Second, Brown seldom situates his argument within larger contemporary debates over the intersection of late ancient social history and the theology of the Western church. Consequently, it is difficult to discern who Brown's primary interlocutors are and where they might disagree with him. I found myself intrigued, for example, and yet seeking more scholarly context to his observation that there is a lack of direct correlation between the monumental historical events of the Roman Empire—such as the conversion of Constantine, the barbarian invasions, and the fall of the West—and the most decisive changes in the Christian religious imagination regarding wealth and the afterlife (p. xiv). One also notes a surprising lack of reference to Richard Finn's 2006 work, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice 313–450*.⁶ Finally, although it admittedly may be asking too much of such a short book, I would have appreciated a more robust treatment of how practices similarly understood to benefit souls in the afterlife (e.g., the Eucharist and love feasts) evolved in ways consonant or dissonant with almsgiving. Brown addresses this to some degree in the first half of the book, but abandons the topic beginning with chapter 3.

In terms of the relevance of *Ransom of the Soul* to the study of the early church from the perspective of or with regard to Mormonism, Brown addresses two themes that have historically been important to Latter-day Saint scholars: the interdependency of the Christian living and dead, on the one hand, and the rituals intended to make the boundaries of this world and the next more permeable, on the other.

6. Richard Finn, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice 313–450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Since the 1940s, LDS scholars have shown general interest in literary evidence of early Christian beliefs in posthumous salvation, the theological logic informing such beliefs, and the origin and nature of the practices associated with them.⁷ Toward the turn of the century, one begins to see sporadic efforts to delimit such investigations to particular time periods, geographical locations, and linguistic traditions, as well as increased attention to the sociohistorical and theological contexts of the sources engaged.⁸ The practice of baptism for the dead, however, is typically the subject around which such studies revolve, and therefore Brown's work invites the LDS scholar to consider other ways that ancient Christians served and otherwise interacted with their kindred dead. Brown's work also helpfully illuminates the ways in which early Christian rituals were understood as vehicles for realizing the expiatory function of the atonement.

Furthermore, Brown's departure from more traditional forms of early church historiography, in my opinion, is worthy of emulation. Historically, LDS histories of the ancient church have largely mirrored other protestant narratives that trace through the centuries the gradual loss of some original or more pure form of Christian thought or practice.⁹ Alterations in the religious imagination are frequently shown

7. For several representative examples, see Hugh Nibley, "Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times," originally published in 1948–49 in the *Improvement Era*; reprinted in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 100–167; David L. Paulsen, Roger D. Cook, and Kendel J. Christensen, "The Harrowing of Hell: Salvation for the Dead in Early Christianity," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/1 (2010): 56–77; David Paulsen and Brock Mason, "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19/2 (2010): 22–49.

8. See for example, John A. Tvedtnes, "Baptism for the Dead: The Coptic Rationale," in *Special Papers of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 2 (1989) subsequently posted online in 2003: <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/publications/baptism-for-the-dead-the-coptic-rationale>; "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity," in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 55–78.

9. For an expansive treatment of the LDS study of the early church vis-à-vis the "Great Apostasy," see Miranda Wilcox and John Young, eds., *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

to conform to the LDS narrative of the Great Apostasy, which understands change primarily in terms of deviation from or pollution of some original truth. Brown's work, on the other hand, invites the reader to consider the relationship between the evolution of theological reflection and the complexity of social history. Change becomes a reflection of and response to the socioeconomic circumstances in which Christians found themselves. Such an approach would both serve as a refreshing complement to existing LDS scholarship on the development of early Christian thought and conform to a growing LDS sensibility for more nuanced and complex historical portrayals of the early church.

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