

Critical Review: Peter Brown's *Augustine of Hippo* University of California Press (1967, 2000)

Augustine of Hippo by Peter Brown, originally published in 1967 and updated in 2000, is a comprehensive look at the life of the Bishop of Hippo, Saint Augustine, and perhaps even more importantly, an exhaustive study of the life of a North African from A.D. 354 to A.D. 431. Brown, in 1967, at the age of 32, before the information age gave birth to Google and superficial research methods, penned a research giant on Augustine. Although the scholastic study of Augustine continued to advance after the first printing in 1967, Brown's work on Augustine still remains a benchmark for Augustinian study today and an edifying place to start for those interested in a study of Augustine.

In this highly annotated book, Brown moves chronologically through Augustine's life, from birth to death, and spares no detail along the way. Brown moves from Augustine's recounting sin as a child by stealing pears from a fruit tree, which haunted him throughout his life, to contemplation and prayer at the end of his life on two hundred and thirty plus books Augustine would organize before his death. *Augustine of Hippo* is broken up into five large sections or transitions of Augustine's life with chronological tables preceding each section. Through each chapter Brown knits together a mix of Augustine's personal timeline of life's major events while never divorcing the history of the Roman Empire, and more specifically, that of 4th and 5th century life in North Africa. Though Brown is never quick to call Augustine out when he is wrong, even when he is obviously wrong, he prods the reader with objective truths until one starts to desire a deeper knowledge of Augustine than even Brown can deliver in 1967.

Augustine, seen as a gifted child by his parents and basically raised by his Catholic mother Monica, was well educated (in Latin but not Greek) in the philosophy of his day, and as such, spent a good portion of his early life concentrating on Manichaeism and then Platonism. He would eventually carry a Neo-Platonist Christian worldview into his Bishopric and be influenced by some of their ideals throughout the remainder of his life. One of Augustine's life-long struggles that Brown accentuates is that of the flesh. Against his mother's wishes, Augustine took a concubine, whom he cared for deeply. He eventually set her aside for a traditional, pre-arranged, first class marriage, which he eventually declined anyway. Augustine ends up leaving for Italy, without telling Monica who was to travel with him, to continue his study in Rhetoric. After years of philosophical struggle, at the age of 33, Augustine begged Ambrose to wash away his sins in baptism, and in April of A.D. 387 he was baptized.

From birth leading up to his Christian conversion, Augustine did not live a "Holy" life, as did other Christian philosophers turned Bishop. Once converted though, Augustine spent much of his life writing and preaching long sermons to fight heresies, most of which he was intimately familiar with himself. Here, Brown chronicles in great detail not only Augustine's conversion and perhaps his greatest literary output of *Confessions*, but also his shift from free-will philosophy of Manichaeism, through his epic fight with the Donatist's, and on to his final battle with original sin and baptism against Pelagius. Brown's use of primary Latin sources here is exhaustive, and sometimes confusing, but he gives these heresy battles in Augustine's life incredible detail by using Augustine's own words from his sermons, letters, and books. Brown's

use of secondary sources throughout the text is even larger in number and his seventeen-page bibliography is a historical gift to future Augustinian study.

One of the more interesting aspects of the text comes from the updated 2000 publication being reviewed here. As explained in an amended preface, Brown did not seek to write an updated edition to his 1967 publication. Instead, Brown viewed his original writing as a historical reference point in itself, written at a point in time in Augustinian study, and one to be kept historically in tact. As with any scholastic research, time moves on and new discoveries are made, as was the case with Augustine. To accommodate for new discoveries made since 1967 Brown added a two-section epilogue outlining such evidences as the 1975 discovery of the Divjak letters and the 1990 findings of the Dolbeau sermon manuscripts. If a reader has any prior knowledge of Augustine the suggestion might be made to read the epilogue first to be able to compare and contrast Brown's findings from 1967 with the more recent evidence.

To conclude the reading of *Augustine of Hippo* is to begin an Augustinian study. Although *Augustine of Hippo* would not be considered an all-inclusive biography it certainly has its place in the historical study of Augustine. For one studying the life of Saint Augustine this biography is essential tool, and Brown has provided an important piece into the historical study of possibly the greatest theologian in history.