



Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church

By William HC Frend

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Although the story of the triumphant rise of Christianity has often been told, it was a triumph achieved through blood and tribulation. The literal meaning of the term martyr meant witness, but among early Christians it quickly acquired a harsher meaning 'one who died for the faith' and that witness through death was responsible for many conversions, including those of Justin Martyr, himself to offer just such witness, and perhaps Tertullian. Persecution was seen by early Christians, as by later historians, as one of the crucial influences on the growth and development of the early Church and Christian beliefs. Why did the Roman Empire persecute Christians? Why did thousands of Christians not merely accept but welcome martyrdom? In his classic work, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, the late W.H.C. Frend explores the mindset of those who suffered persecution as well as the motivation of those who persecuted them. He shows the critical importance for early Christians of Jewish ideas, influenced heavily as they were by the story of Daniel and the trauma of the revolt of the Maccabees. He argues that the Christian concept of martyrdom, so highly regarded among early Christians, can only be understood as springing from Jewish roots. Frend explores a number of major persecutions, such as that in Lyons in the second century, the Decian Persecution in the third, and the Great Persecution under Diocletian in the fourth, showing both the common themes and the variations, and examines also the relationship between the heavenly kingdom of Christ and the rule of the earthly emperor. In doing so he shows how the persecutions formed an essential part in a providential philosophy of history that has profoundly influenced European political thought.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Professor Frend is Bye-Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge and is Emeritus Professor of Ecclesiastical History, University of Glasgow. He is the author of The Donatist Church, The Early Church, The Archaeology of Early Christianity, Saints and Sinners in the Early Church and The Rise of Christianity.

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