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## 27 CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

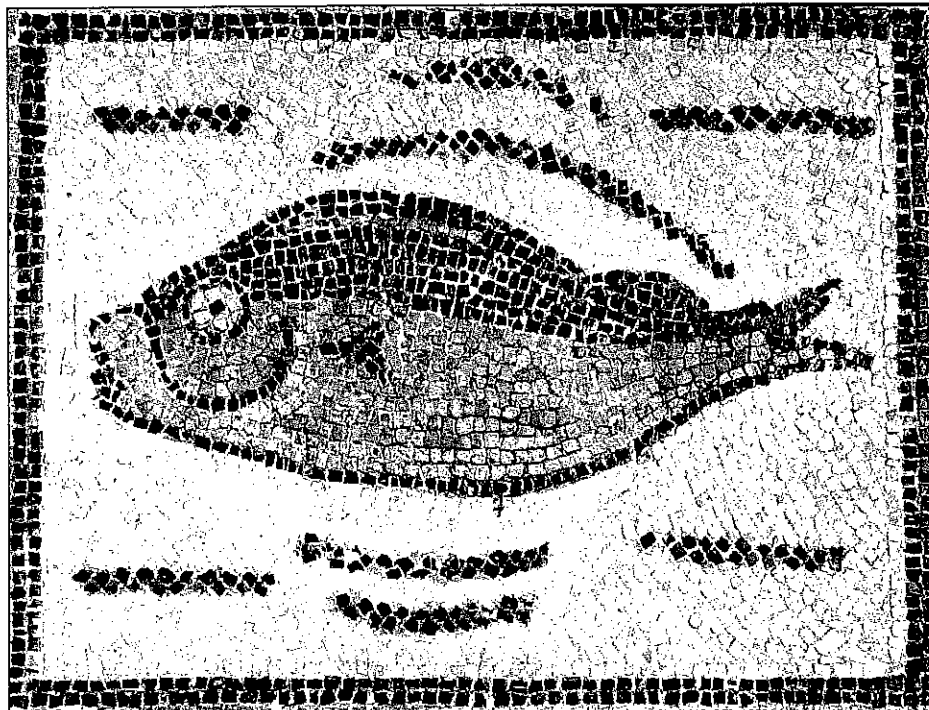
*Between the A.D. 100s and A.D. 200s, successive Roman emperors persecuted Christians and attempted to completely wipe out Christianity from the empire. At the end of the A.D. 300s, when Christianity became widely accepted throughout the Roman Empire, Christian emperors showed a similar lack of tolerance for pagan worship. In the two excerpts below, the first by Eusebius, discusses Emperor Diocletian's (reigned: 284–305) persecution of Christians in Palestine, while the second is from the law code of Emperor Theodosius I (reigned: 379–395). As you read the excerpts, ask yourself why the Roman emperors and Christians felt it necessary to persecute "unbelievers."*

### *Persecution in Palestine*

**I**t was in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, in the month . . . called April by the Romans, about the time of the feast of our Saviour's passion, while Flavianus was governor of the province of Palestine, that letters were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that imperial freedmen, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom.

Such was the force of the first edict against us. But not long after, other letters were issued, commanding that all the bishops of the churches everywhere be first thrown into prison, and afterward, by every artifice, be compelled to sacrifice [to the gods]. . . .

*The fish, a traditional Christian symbol representing the Lord*



In the course of the second year, the persecution against us increased greatly. And at that time, Urbanus being governor of the province, imperial edicts were issued to him, commanding by a general decree that all the people should sacrifice at once in the different cities, and offer libations to the idols.

### *Theodosius Against Heretics*

It is our desire that all the various nations which are subject to our Clemency and Moderation, should continue in the profession of that religion which was delivered to the Romans by the divine Apostle Peter, as it hath been preserved by faithful tradition. . . . We authorize the followers of this [religion] to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgement, they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics. . . . They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation, and in the second the punishment which our authority, in accordance with the will of Heaven, shall decide to inflict. . . .

Let them be entirely excluded even from the thresholds of churches, since we permit no heretics to hold their unlawful assemblies in the towns. If they attempt any disturbance, we decree that their fury shall be suppressed and that they shall be expelled outside the walls of the cities. . . .

#### READING REVIEW

1. What were the terms of Diocletian's first edict?
2. How did Theodosius characterize those who did not follow the Christian faith?
3. Why do you think both the Roman emperors and later Christians persecuted those who would not accept their respective religions?