

The Principle of Adoption

Source: Tacitus: *Histories*, Book 1., 15-16, translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb. Slightly adapted. Full text online at <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/histories.html>

Augustus had passed on the principate to members of his own family, who formed an odd sort of dynasty. Galba initiated what was perhaps the most successful method of transfer of power—the adoption as son by a reigning emperor of an adult male, modeled on the method of the Julio-Claudians of adopting a cousin or other relation as son and heir. Tacitus describes Galba’s motives. In fact in 69 CE, it was Vespasian who emerged victorious, and he was succeeded by his two sons, T. and Domitian. With Nerva’s adoption of Trajan, the adoptive method was used for almost a century until M. Aurelius allowed his (natural) son Commodus to succeed him.

We are told that Galba, taking hold of Piso’s hand, spoke to this effect: “If I were a private man, and were now adopting you by the Act of the Curiae before the pontiffs, as our custom is, it would be a high honor to me to introduce into my family a descendant of Cn. Pompey and M. Crassus; it would be a distinction to you to add to the nobility of your race the honors of the Sulpician and Lutatian houses. As it is, I, who have been called to the throne by the unanimous consent of gods and men, am moved by your splendid endowments and by my own patriotism to offer to you, a man of peace, that power, for which our ancestors fought, and which I myself obtained by war. I am following the precedent of the Divine Augustus, who placed on an eminence next to his own, first his nephew Marcellus, then his son-in-law Agrippa, afterwards his grandsons, and finally Tiberius Nero, his stepson. But Augustus looked for a successor in his own family, I look for one in the state, not because I have no relatives or companions of my campaigns, but because it was not by any private favor that I myself received the imperial power. Let the principle of my choice be shown not only by my connections which I have set aside for you, but by your own. You have a brother, noble as yourself, and older, who would be well worthy of this dignity, were you not worthier. Your age is such as to be now free from the passions of youth, and such your life that in the past you have nothing to excuse. Hitherto, you have only borne adversity; prosperity tries the heart with keener temptations; for hardships may be endured, whereas we are spoiled by success. You indeed will cling with the same constancy to honor, freedom, friendship, the best possessions of the human spirit, but others will seek to weaken them with their servility. You will be fiercely assailed by adulation, by flattery, that worst poison of the true heart, and by the selfish interests of individuals. You and I speak together to-day with perfect frankness, but others will be more ready to address us as emperors than as men. For to urge his duty upon a prince is

indeed a hard matter; to flatter him, whatever his character, is a mere routine gone through without any heart.

“Could the vast frame of this empire have stood and preserved its balance without a directing spirit, I was not unworthy of inaugurating a republic. As it is, we have been long reduced to a position, in which my age confer no greater boon on the Roman people than a good successor, your youth no greater than a good emperor. Under Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius, we were, so to speak, the inheritance of a single family. The choice which begins with us will be a substitute for freedom. Now that the family of the Julii and the Claudii has come to an end, adoption will discover the worthiest successor. To be begotten and born of a princely race is a mere accident, and is only valued as such. In adoption there is nothing that need bias the judgment, and if you wish to make a choice, an unanimous opinion points out the man. Let Nero be ever before your eyes, swollen with the pride of a long line of Caesars; it was not Vindex with his unarmed province, it was not myself with my single legion, that shook his yoke from our necks. It was his own profligacy, his own brutality, and that, though there had been before no precedent of an emperor condemned by his own people. We, who have been called to power by the issues of war, and by the deliberate judgment of others, shall incur unpopularity, however illustrious our character. Do not however be alarmed, if, after a movement which has shaken the world, two legions are not yet quiet. I did not myself succeed to a throne without anxiety; and when men shall hear of your adoption I shall no longer be thought old, and this is the only objection which is now made against me. Nero will always be regretted by the thoroughly depraved; it is for you and me to take care, that he be not regretted also by the good. To prolong such advice, suits not this occasion, and all my purpose is fulfilled if I have made a good choice in you. The most practical and the shortest method of distinguishing between good and bad measures, is to think what you yourself would or would not like under another emperor. It is not here, as it is among nations despotically ruled, that there is a distinct governing family, while all the rest are slaves. You have to reign over men who cannot bear either absolute slavery or absolute freedom.” This, with more to the same effect, was said by Galba; he spoke to Piso as if he were creating an emperor; the others addressed him as if he were an emperor already.

It is said of Piso that he betrayed no discomposure or excessive joy, either to the gaze to which he was immediately subjected, or afterwards when all eyes were turned upon him. His language to the Emperor, his father, was reverential; his language about himself was modest. He showed no change in look or manner; he seemed like one who had the power rather than the wish to rule.