

Plutarch's Life of Tiberius Gracchus¹

8. Of the territory which the Romans won in war from their neighbors, a part they sold, and a part they made common land, and assigned it for occupation to the poor and indigent among the citizens, on payment of a small rent into the public treasury. And when the rich began to offer larger rents and drove out the poor, a law was enacted forbidding the holding by one person of more than five hundred acres of land. For a short time this enactment gave a check to the rapacity of the rich, and was of assistance to the poor, who remained in their places on the land which they had rented and occupied the allotment which each had held from the outset. But later on the neighboring rich men, by means of fake identities, transferred these rentals to themselves, and finally held most of the land openly in their own names. Then the poor, who had been ejected from their land, no longer showed themselves eager for military service, and neglected the bringing up of children, so that soon all Italy was conscious of a dearth of freemen, and was filled with gangs of foreign slaves, by whose aid the rich cultivated their estates, from which they had driven away the free citizens... As Tiberius was passing through Tuscany [a section of Italy north of Rome] on his way to Numantia, and observed the dearth of inhabitants in the country, and that those who tilled its soil or tended its flocks there were imported barbarian slaves, he then first conceived the public policy which was the cause of countless ills to the two brothers.

9. And it is thought that a law dealing with injustice and rapacity so great was never drawn up in milder and gentler terms. For men who ought to have been punished for their disobedience and to have surrendered with payment of a fine the land which they were illegally enjoying, these men it merely ordered to abandon their unjust acquisitions upon being paid their value, and to admit into ownership of them such citizens as needed assistance.

...Tiberius, striving to support a measure which was honorable and just with an eloquence that would have adorned even a meaner cause, was formidable and invincible, whenever, with the people crowding around the rostra, he took his stand there and pleaded for the poor. "The wild beasts that roam over Italy," he would say, "have every one of them a cave or lair to lurk in; but the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed, but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wander about with their wives and children. And it is with lying lips that their imperators exhort the soldiers in their battles to defend tombs and shrines from the enemy; for not a man of them has an hereditary altar, not one of all these many Romans an ancestral tomb, but they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and though they are styled masters of the world, they have not a single clod of earth that is their own."

10. Such words as these, the product of a lofty spirit and genuine feeling, and falling upon the ears of a people profoundly moved and fully aroused to the speaker's support, no adversary of

¹ Translated by Bernadotte Perrin, with minor modifications.

Tiberius could successfully withstand. Abandoning therefore all counter-pleading, they addressed themselves to Marcus Octavius, one of the popular tribunes, a young man of sober character, discreet, and an intimate companion of Tiberius. On this account Octavius at first tried to hold himself aloof, out of regard for Tiberius; but he was forced from his position, as it were, by the prayers and supplications of many influential men, so that he set himself in opposition to Tiberius and staved off the passage of the law. Now, the decisive power is in the hands of any tribune who interposes his veto; for the wishes of the majority avail nothing if one tribune is in opposition. Angered at this procedure, Tiberius withdrew his considerate law, and introduced this time one which was more agreeable to the multitude and more severe against the wrongdoers, since it simply ordered them to vacate without compensation the land which they had acquired in violation of the earlier laws.

11. ...[And when Octavius would still not relent], Tiberius resorted to a measure which was illegal and unseemly, the ejection of Octavius from his office; but he was unable in any other way to bring this law to the vote....Tiberius, after premising that, since they were colleagues in office with equal powers and differed on weighty measures, it was impossible for them to complete their term of office without open war, said he saw only one remedy for this, and that was for one or the other of them to give up his office. Indeed, he urged Octavius to put to the people a vote on his own case first, promising to retire at once to private life if this should be the will of the citizens. But Octavius was unwilling, and therefore Tiberius declared that he would put the case of Octavius [to a vote] unless Octavius should change his mind upon reflection.

12. When, however, Octavius was not to be persuaded, Tiberius introduced a law depriving him of his tribuneship, and summoned the citizens to cast their votes upon it at once. Now, there were thirty-five tribes, and when seventeen of them had cast their votes, and the addition of one more would make it necessary for Octavius to become a private citizen, Tiberius called a halt in the voting, and again entreated Octavius, embracing and kissing him in the sight of the people, and fervently begging him not to allow himself to be dishonored, and not to attach to a friend responsibility for a measure so grievous and severe.

On hearing these entreaties, we are told, Octavius was not altogether untouched or unmoved; his eyes filled with tears and he stood silent for a long time. But when he turned his gaze towards the men of wealth and substance who were standing in a body together, his awe of them, as it would seem, and his fear of ill repute among them, led him to take every risk with boldness and bid Tiberius do what he pleased. And so the law [depriving Octavius of his office] was passed...

13. After this the agrarian law was passed, and three men were chosen for the survey and distribution of the public land, Tiberius himself, Appius Claudius his father-in-law, and Caius Gracchus his brother, who was not at Rome, but was serving under Scipio in the expedition against Numantia.