AUTHORITY AND DISSENT are concepts that operate with reference to power—authority holds power, but dissent attempts to negate, neuter, or negotiate power. In this essay, I would like to explore the operation of authority and dissent with reference to power systems and social formation, seen through selected texts from Mediterranean antiquity—Paul of Tarsus’s first letter to the Jesus Movement community in Corinth, Cicero’s De Officiis, Plutarch’s Sayings of Kings and Commanders, and late antique Christian monasticism. My essential approach to these texts is to read for the kind of persuasive activity in which the creators engaged, either authoritative persuasion or dissenting persuasion. Each category of persuasion functions in different ways to attempt to form readers and the social spaces that readers inhabit. Authoritative persuasion (such as in Paul’s writing to the Corinthian followers of Jesus) dominates by imposing the author’s ideas on the readers who view the author as an authority. Dissenting persuasive literature, however, is conservative and points to idealized, mythologized past as the model for contemporary social formation. This last point is the key argument of my essay—that dissenting persuasion in the antique Mediterranean is a conservative endeavor.

Seeing dissent as conservative is, to my mind, underappreciated. Shaped in a post-Enlightenment world, we often see dissent as a forward-looking, change-oriented enterprise. Nineteenth century ideas such as liberalism, socialism, or Zionism dissented from historical or contemporary social orders and looked to a future changed from the past. What I read in the antique Mediterranean, however, suggests that pre-Enlightenment dissent looked backward to an ideal society and encouraged the
conservation of that social order. While I confine my exploration here to the region and time period of my expertise, the Mediterranean in antiquity, I think this principle applies to other times and places, and applies to other parts of the antique Mediterranean that I do not here explore (e.g., Second Temple or early rabbinical Judaism, as there are far better experts on Judaism in this volume). Thus, I do not mean to suggest that there is only one kind of dissent, but that the conservative dissent of antiquity is something that warrants consideration.

I look at the purpose and process of writing in the antique Mediterranean in my first section, demonstrating that this expensive activity required a compelling motivation. I then briefly examine persuasive literature and persuasion as an activity, adding to the discussion the approaches of power and social formation. My third section is a brief look at a piece of authoritative persuasive literature (Paul of Tarsus’s first letter to the Jesus Movement in Corinth) to establish a point of comparison to dissenting persuasive literature. I spend the remainder of the essay demonstrating how dissenting persuasive literature in the antique Mediterranean was a conservative activity that pointed to the past as the model for present social construction.

“Authoritative literature,” “dissent literature,” and “persuasive literature” are not technical literary genres utilized by scholars for the antique periods of Mediterranean history, nor do I intend here to create new formalized textual categories. Instead, they provide a useful heuristic device for gathering texts that appear to engage in similar kinds of persuasive activity, hold similar relationships to power, and attempt to form social groups along similar lines. I suggest that a useful method for reading historical texts starts with the single question—what change does the author want to see as a result of this text being produced, read, and (if applicable) enacted? Most of what we would call “literature” in classical and late antiquity, regardless of its genre, seeks to persuade the reader or hearer about something. Most frequently, the author intends the reader to make some mental, emotional, or active change as a result of interacting with the text. Whether a biography or a religious/philosophical treatise or even a collection of stories and sayings, authors intended to make a point when they engaged in the expensive enterprise of textual production.

WHY WRITE?

Writing, in antiquity, was a costly activity. In addition to the materials, there was a basic outlay either for education to learn to write for oneself or to hire someone who could write. While Roger Bagnall demonstrated that “there was no necessary link between wealth or officeholding on the one hand and literacy on the other” in late
antique Egyptian villages, wealthy, high-classed townspeople were more likely to be literate but also not infrequently hired others to write for them. Learning to write was costly, so unless absolutely necessary (for one’s job or because of social standing), most people did not learn it—and even those who did know how to write not infrequently relied on groups of writing professionals to ensure that the documents came out looking and sounding correct.

Outside of writing exercises, receipts, or incidental documents, the production of a text took time, money, and consideration—thus the contents of the text were considered either important enough to preserve or important enough not to entrust to word-of-mouth delivery. The purpose of writing was to create a record—something verifiable, transferable, and persistent. A written product, though, was not simply an unbiased record of information. The decision to write consisted of micro decisions about what details to include, what details to leave out, how to frame the information, what kinds of rhetorical devices to deploy, how long or short the document ought to be, how much of the author’s position or self to reveal, how much and what to say explicitly versus implicitly, and what to elide. In short, writing involved a series of considerations revolving around the author and the reader and around what the author intended for the reader to think, believe, feel, or desire after reading the text.

TO PERSUADE

I see persuasion as the primary purpose in producing most texts in antiquity. Authors intended their texts to impact the reader, to make a change in the reader’s internal orientation. Not infrequently, such changes in internal orientation could lead to changes in social organization. I follow Blossom Stefaniw, who has made the case for partially abandoning the genre-classification approach to late antique texts. She argued that fruitful work could instead come from examining how texts approach the related topics of making knowledge and making human subjects. By extension, I argue that reading texts from their persuasive perspective gives us insight into the kinds of social groups that the authors desired, sometimes as a function of the kinds of human subjects they wish to form and sometimes in their project of social formation writ large. Authors used texts not just to create new subjects in their desired images but also to form those subjects into social groups that followed certain norms and expectations. In other words, successful texts formed people, people formed groups, and those groups followed patterns outlined by the texts. When we read texts as persuasive literature, it allows us to uncover something of the social orders in which the texts arose and something of the author’s desires for social reformation. Writing of letters in antiquity,
Stanley Stowers suggested that “it is more helpful to think of letters in terms of the actions that people performed by means of them” than it is to think about letters simply transmitting information. Writing moves the reader; it is not just a neutral activity intended to spread data.

In this way, I agree with Annemáre Kotzé’s assertion that classifying according to genres has more to do with exploring a work’s specific purpose than with assigning any technical features to a work. For her (and our) purposes, this lens is especially true of persuasive literature. Where I depart from Kotzé is in adhering to technical ancient genres such as protreptic, and its related category of paraenetic, however modified modern definitions of those genres might be. James Henderson Collins II’s work on early Greek protreptics proves useful here, particularly his discussion of genre development. Whereas he conceptualized protreptic as a more concretized genre in later literature, of early protreptic literature he developed a “fluid model of rhetorical genres” that means scholars “are not forced to draw firm lines between explicit and implicit protreptic, external and internal criteria—and then transgress them—because protreptic discourse in the fourth century [BCE] is not yet a genre in form or content; it is rooted in a speaker’s objective and shift in attitude.” Instead of a technical genre, the speaker/author’s goal and desired result, however they appear in the text, define the texts as a protreptic—Collins’s view of early protreptics is a better approach for later protreptic literature as well. Abandoning technical classifications, we read instead for persuasion—what kind of people the author wanted to create, what knowledge the author utilized to make those people, and what social order (whether desired, idealized, or actual) those people so persuaded would create.

When reading for persuasion, we must also read for the power position of the speaker/author, either real or perceived (and whether self-perceived or externally perceived), and how that affects their persuasive discourse. I posit paired classifications of persuasive literature, authoritative and dissenting, according to the power capabilities and power positions of the authors. Authoritative literature functions persuasively from a position of actual or perceived power. If the author holds sway over the reader, then his words carry the mark of being desirable for the reader, if only so that the reader will avoid possible sanction or the internalized feelings of fear that might come from the possibility of sanctions. Dissenting persuasion recognizes disparate power dynamics and seeks to make a case in the face of potential sanction, meaning sometimes the dissenting persuasion is covert. Dissenting literature functions persuasively either by trying to present the best possible argument or by appealing to the emotions of the reader. Each kind of persuasion utilizes different methods to make the case for social (or individual) formation based on the kind of power that the author holds in perception or reality.
As an example of persuasion from a position of power, I turn to Paul of Tarsus’s mid-50s CE letter to the ethnically and religiously mixed Jesus Movement community in the Greek port city of Corinth. The Corinthian Jesus Movement at this time faced a number of fractures—mainly over allegiances to divergent teachers (1 Cor 1–4) and debates over who to include in the community (1 Cor 5–6)—apart from a series of issues that the community itself wrote about to Paul, asking for his guidance. Jews and non-Jews seemed to have common places and options for leadership and liturgy, and this overlap caused problems as competing social and religious expectations mixed in a single community (for example, the dispute over eating meat dedicated to gods or goddesses in 1 Cor 8:1–11.1). Paul reminded the community early in the letter that he was one of their founders and that he was among the Movement’s leaders who knew best the teachings of Jesus. Part of the opening section on unity was Paul’s reestablishing himself as an authority to the community and establishing that this letter was authoritative. He then legislated certain matters for the community, with punishment ranging from expulsion from the community (1 Cor 5) to the fracturing of individual relationships with the divine (1 Cor 11:27–32), and then announced that he was sending a series of people who would check up on the community (1 Cor 16:10–12), culminating in Paul himself (1 Cor 16:5–8).

The entire letter addressed problems within the community, most frequently problems of division. The social group was not coherent, and Paul desired close social cohesion. Since some of these fractures appeared along ethnic lines (or along other lines, such as dietary practices, that could closely map to certain ethnic groups), Paul proposed a novel solution—deemphasize the ethnic lines, remove the divisions. He wrote therefore to the Corinthians that entry into the community homogenized them and that “Jew and Greek” were now subordinated by the one community following Jesus of Nazareth, whom Paul and the Corinthian community following Jesus believed to be messiah. He desired a unified social group that embraced a single identity, so he sublimated (in the archaic sense) their previous identities. Paul’s reordering the social group to deemphasize ethnic difference is an example of an authoritative text issuing a directive intended to change individual orientation for the purpose of forming a homogenous social group. Because he was (or viewed himself as) an authority to the community, Paul was able to repeatedly direct the readers toward particular behaviors and identities—his authoritative persuasion was direct; it was prescriptive and proscriptive to form the people and form the community.
Paul’s letter to the Jesus Movement followers in Corinth also reveals an insidious element of social formation through authoritative persuasive literature. When he told the members of the Jesus Movement community in Corinth to reorient their former ethno-religious identities, it was not a benign act. Telling Greeks that their Greek identity was less important than their new identity as messiah followers while living in a Hellenized Roman city on the isthmus between Athens and Sparta, on the site of what had been a major Greek city—surrounded by Greco-Roman buildings, temples to the Romanized Greek deities, Hellenistic culture, and the Greek language—changed little. Everything around them reminded them of who they were—they were Greeks. For the Jewish members of the Jesus Movement, however, deemphasizing their Jewish identity—the identity of a minority religious and ethnic group in a Greek city—was destructive, taking away their history, culture, kinships, and self-conception. Even if Paul were expanding the border of “Jewish” by incorporating non-Jews into the community of those acceptable to God, the very expansion of the border eliminated the old identity encompassed by “Jewish.”

Paul was able to accomplish this rhetorical move that functionally abolished Jewish identity, or at least the prior form of Jewish identity, because of his authority (perceived or actual) within the community. Throughout the letter to the Corinthians Paul sought to eliminate discohesive differences within the community, in some instances differences between the Jews and Greeks; so he called for the replacement of ethnic identities with a religious one centered on the person Jesus. Effectively, his persuasive authoritative discourse on the ground served to highlight the otherness of the Jews living in Corinth, to take the minority identity that was always at risk of deemphasis and move it closer to destruction in the new community. That this reorientation was more than just deemphasizing, but functionally destructive, is supported by another letter Paul of Tarsus wrote to another Jesus Movement community, decisively declaring “there is neither Jew, nor Greek” in the new Jesus Movement identity. The effect of Paul’s words demonstrates that authoritative persuasive discourse can be destructive when forming a community.

Authoritative persuasion depends on the author/speaker operating in a position of power to form people and social groups. The individual’s power (real or perceived) over others creates the “authority” of authoritative discourse and allows the speaker to attempt direct change. When authors or speakers lack power or are disenfranchised in a particular social context, however, they must rely on other discursive means to attempt to persuade people. Because they speak from a position without power, critiquing the power system (dissenting from the social order) required them to find a common ground from which they could persuade those against whom they dissent. This common ground, in many instances, appears to be an appeal to the past that calls for the conservation of older forms of being or social ordering. Power is the determining
factor in whether a piece of persuasive literature is authoritative or dissenting—does the author have the power to tell people what to do?

**DISSENTER PERSUASION AND CONSERVATIVE APPEAL TO THE PAST**

Dissenting persuasive literature operates in opposition to power from a position of disenfranchisement. Because dissenting literature cannot rely on its own authority, it may appeal instead to an earlier, often idealized form of society in which the author stood (or had the opportunity to stand) in a position of power. A good example of this strategy comes from the death throes of the Roman Republic and the ensuing wars, especially in Marcus Tullius Cicero’s last treatise, *De Officiis*, from late 44 BCE.24 After the assassination of Julius Caesar and with Rome still fractured, Cicero outlined, in this work addressed to Cicero’s son, how to work out apparent contradictions between one’s moral duties and the things that appear necessary to preserve and enlighten one’s life. Cicero focused especially on the conduct of public officials; he clearly disliked Julius Caesar and expressed that dislike openly.25 For Cicero, Caesar was the improper public official.26 However, Cicero’s other opponent, Mark Antony, received very little open mention. Cicero lamented the collapse of Roman republican (though more an oligarchy than a true republic) political order27 but did not disparage Mark Antony and the party of Caesar by name. He instead inveighed against “the miscreants with whom the world abounds,”28 and perhaps he had Mark Antony’s machinations in mind when he wrote, “Who fails to see that those promises are not binding which are extorted by intimidation or which we make when misled by false pretenses?”29 In this treatise that denounces the misdeeds of Caesar and was written while Cicero was delivering the *Philippics* against Mark Antony, Cicero never mentioned Mark Antony by name in *De Officiis*. The *Philippics* praised Octavius, Caesar’s heir, by name; *De Officiis* did not mention him. Cicero addressed the proper conduct of Roman public officials but did not name the major living official whom he saw as acting poorly—namely, his opponent Mark Antony.

It seems clear that Cicero wrote *De Officiis* in part as a piece of dissenting persuasive literature against Mark Antony and the collapse of the Republic, meant to appeal to the morality of the Caesarian partisans—Cicero’s own opponents.30 The *Philippics* appealed to Cicero’s own senatorial party, attacking Mark Antony and persuading them to oppose him directly. *De Officiis* encouraged dissent among the Caesarians against Mark Antony, and possibly even hedged against a potential power grab by Caesar’s newly adopted son, Octavius, by appealing to the Roman idea of duty.31 To the Caesarian faction, Cicero was not in a position of authority—he was one of the
most visible figures in the opposition. The normal levers of power, the ones Cicero had trained to use, were eroding or gone entirely. If he openly criticized Caesar’s supporter Mark Antony in *De Officiis*, he would be less likely to persuade the opposing Caesarian faction. So, being in the dissenting position to the Caesarians, he criticized in vague generalities and wrote an entire treatise about weighing moral obligations and the desire to advance one’s own position—a pointed, though tacit, indictment of those who no longer fulfilled their moral duties and instead sought only their own gain.

In writing *De Officiis*, Cicero sought to return the levers of power to their previous positions—the Senate, the consulship, the courts—reshaping and returning Roman society to an original (if idealized) republican form. In late 44, Cicero used both kinds of persuasive literature—authoritative and dissenting in the *Philippics* and *De Officiis*, respectively—to persuade people to reject the Caesarians’ position (especially in the person of Mark Antony) and restore the social and political order of the Roman Republic. From *De Officiis*, though, we see a key component of dissenting persuasive literature—it appeals to idealizations of some past glory, of a time before the mess of the author’s contemporary context. Cicero referenced past authorities as exemplars for contemporary people in ways that were more than just the standard appeals to the authority of antiquity. The past was good and provided a moral model; the present is bad and breaks with the moral model. Past leaders were best and (mostly) followed the best ways to act; present leaders are worst and have broken the norms of behavior. Ideas from the past should be normative, particularly ideas about civil governance and the qualities of leaders, while new ideas that reshape the political reality and the terms of political leadership should be shunned. And, most importantly, past social forms should be preserved, while new social forms go to the dustbin of failed experimentation. This was Cicero’s conservative, backward-looking, dissenting persuasion.

Some of Cicero’s examples of good and bad moral and political behavior were comparatively recent—in his own lifetime—while other examples were from other periods or other regions. All the examples, though, served the double purpose of demonstrating to Marcus the proper conduct of a public official and how to train for public service, and demonstrating to other readers the reasons (and persons responsible) for the Republic’s downfall. Because of his dissenting persuasive task, Cicero inserted certain asides about the collapse of old Rome, the recent civil war, and the future of Rome:

Let me add, however, that as long as the empire of the Roman people maintained itself by acts of service, not of oppression, wars were waged in the interest of our allies or to safeguard our supremacy; the end of our wars was marked by acts of clemency or by only a necessary degree of severity; the senate was a haven of refuge for
kings, tribes, and nations; and the highest ambition of our magistrates and generals was to defend our provinces and allies with justice and honor. And so our government could be called more accurately a protectorate of the world than an empire."

Marcus had fought under Pompey in the civil war and so knew well, and agreed with, Cicero’s position against the Caesarians and how they had led to the collapse of the Roman Republic. So his lament that “in Rome only the walls of her houses remain standing... but our republic we have lost forever” appealed more to the sensibilities of others who may not have seen as clearly how Rome had fallen. Cicero continually appealed to the moral sensibilities of his readers, a sensibility shaped by an idealized and preferred past, to convince them of the precarious position of contemporary Rome—a persuasion from the dissenting position to those Caesarians who still might be moved to act (as Brutus once had been) for the good of Rome.

This appeal to the past, I submit, is as destructive (and potentially dangerous) as what we saw in Paul of Tarsus’s authoritative discourse that functionally removed only the minority identity and retained the dominant one. Appeal to the past is dangerous because it can make dissent literature an essentially conservative enterprise.

Conservatism is a notoriously difficult concept to define, and I do not here want to wade into the century-long debates about the nature or origins of philosophical, political, or social conservatism. The essence of conservatism, though, lies in retention—retaining a political or social system, retaining a track record over innovation, retaining or conserving the object under consideration in its traditional form (especially in reference to power and authority). In the most common example, conservative politics seeks to retain the levers of power in the hands of people in the social order who have habitually wielded them. One of the mechanisms of conserving power is to retain a particular kind of society, perhaps an older and more homogenized form of the society, in order to limit the number or kind of people able to wield that power. Conservative religious groups seek to retain the religion in an earlier, older form that the practitioners view as more proper. Conservatism looks to the past for a model of how to create the present. Dissent literature, as a conservative enterprise, did the same thing in antiquity. It idolized the past to create an idealized future social form. Frequently we consider dissent as being in the realm of progressive ideations (dissenting to move forward thoughts or social systems), but I suggest that it may in fact be conservative.

We return to Cicero to see this conservative appeal to the past in action. While I contend that his primary antagonists in De Officiis were the Caesarians, Cicero even disagreed with some of his contemporary allies, such as Cato the Younger, who was known for his deeply republican bent and his dedication to Stoic morality. Cicero sanctioned Cato, however briefly, in a discussion of what to do when what is apparently
expedient for an individual appears to go against the accepted morality. For an example of how true expediency never violates morality, Cicero felt compelled to look back two hundred years to the First Punic War between Rome and Carthage and the conduct of the Roman general Marcus Atilius Regulus. In brief, the Carthaginians captured Regulus, but then released him to return to Rome under one condition—either he secured the release of captured Carthaginian nobility, or he returned himself to Carthage to face punishment. Upon returning to Rome, he argued that Rome should not release the Carthaginian generals and, according to the story Cicero believed, Regulus returned to Carthage. Regulus argued that his disadvantage was not outweighed by the advantage to Rome of holding a number of upper-classed Carthaginian generals. Cicero compared this to the actions of a number of other people—later than Regulus—who decided to advocate what was to their advantage instead of what was to the advantage of the Republic. In some instances, Cicero praised Regulus for his devotion to the Republic; in others, Cicero praised Regulus for his devotion to the moral order. Cicero wrote of Regulus, “From the many splendid examples in history, therefore, we could not easily point to one either more praiseworthy or more heroic than the conduct of Regulus.”

Keeping with his consistent appeal to the past, Cicero’s praise of Regulus extended beyond the person and to the nature of his environment, the Roman Republic in the mid-200s BCE. He wrote, “For the fact of his returning [to Carthage] may seem admirable to us nowadays, but in those times he could not have done otherwise. That merit, therefore, belongs to the age, not to the man.” Throughout De Officiis, Cicero condemned the wrongdoing of public figures and then near the very end praised the past actions of Regulus not as individual actions in themselves but as functions of the kind of social order that Regulus inhabited. The older social order. The better social order. The process of social formation was paramount to Cicero, as he indicated when he wrote a little earlier, “This, then, ought to be the chief end of all men, to make the interest of each individual and of the whole body politic identical. For if the individual appropriates to selfish ends what should be devoted to the common good, all human fellowship will be destroyed.”

Under the guise of a treatise to his son—and training his son was partly, but only partly, what Cicero intended—Cicero wrote his De Officiis as a piece of dissenting literature that attacked the bad conduct of his contemporary public figures by a conservative appeal to the past. That he did not mention Mark Antony, even though he wrote the treatise while delivering his Philippics against Mark Antony, suggests that Cicero’s secondary audience was people in the Caesarian faction whom he considered persuadable. To openly attack Mark Antony would make them unlikely to listen. By appealing to the better order of the older age, Cicero invited the comparison and suggested to the reader that what they saw in the immediate aftermath of the Roman Civil War
did not match the Roman ideals. This is the heart of the conservative enterprise of dissenting literature.

Two additional brief examples illustrate my argument that dissenting persuasion was conservative in antiquity. The first, from Greek literature, is Plutarch’s *Sayings of Kings and Commanders*, a collection of sayings written to the Roman emperor Trajan—if we take the introductory letter as genuine—who ruled between 98 and 117 CE. Plutarch wrote to Trajan that the words of an individual, more than his actions, reveal best his nature. And so Plutarch wrote a collection of sayings by great military and political leaders from the past—a collection in which Plutarch selectively omitted some sayings that he included in other sayings texts. The act of omission suggests that Plutarch intended his *Sayings of Kings* to serve a purpose beyond simply offering a compendium of good ideas. Plutarch intended these sayings to form Trajan and his leadership by pointing him to the idealized leaders of the past whose words should shape the actions of Emperor Trajan, actions that would form societies. Hence Plutarch called these leaders people worth remembering.

What Plutarch would have Trajan remember of these leaders was their moral character, prowess in administration, wisdom, and abilities leading armies—in short, the ways that leaders from the past formed their societies. While Plutarch spent the majority of the *Sayings* quoting from Greek and Persian leaders across the centuries, he ended with sayings from the Roman Republic and from Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus, the transitional leaders into the Roman Empire. The very last saying that Plutarch included found Piso carefully building a sturdy house, leading Caesar Augustus to draw a comparison between a well-built house and the eternality of Rome—by building well, Piso suggested a belief in Rome’s perpetuity and helped guarantee that perpetuity by building something to last. This final apophthegm holds the key to interpreting how Plutarch wanted Trajan to remember the leaders he recorded in the *Sayings of Kings*—by emulating their wisdom, morality, and leadership, Trajan would ensure the perpetuity of the Roman Empire and the Roman social order by building an orderly house.

Plutarch did not appeal to any philosophical arguments for building the solid Roman house. Instead, he appealed to examples from the past, asking Trajan to repeat the past to ensure a good present and future. That Plutarch may have written from a position of dissent comes from reading the opening dedication, in which Plutarch wrote that biographies of leaders, such as his, required considerable time to extract the wise words of leaders from the morass of their actions and the activities surrounding them. Since extensive citations take too much time, Plutarch produced a summary of the words of leaders that could cut to the heart of what Plutarch desired Trajan to learn about leadership in the service of social formation or building the Roman house into perpetuity. There was clearly something about Trajan’s conduct that Plutarch
desired his biographies of the Roman emperors and his Sayings to correct; Plutarch is thus in the dissenting position regarding Trajan's leadership. We cannot be entirely sure about the details of Plutarch's dissent, but his appeal to the past is the form that his dissenting persuasion took.

Perhaps Trajan’s war against the Parthian Empire, expanding the Roman Empire to its farthest eastern point and attempting a point even further, was a point of contention for Plutarch. Plutarch opened his section of sayings by Alexander with an apophthegm that finds Alexander as a boy lamenting his father’s many victories as leaving him nothing to conquer when he grows up: “What does it help . . . if I have much but achieve nothing?” The point is that expansion and possession, for their own sakes, are not desirable. This saying, and perhaps the whole Sayings, could be read in Trajan’s context as a pointed referendum on territorial overreach at the expense of management. Plutarch may have written his sayings text in part from a position of dissent, wishing Trajan to refocus his military and political attention and ambitions on the empire he had instead of expanding the borders north and east. Indeed, many of the sayings focus on political administration, highlighting one of the forms of leadership that Plutarch emphasized to Trajan.

My final, and briefest, example comes from fifth century monastic Christianity, during which the religion found itself fracturing under the weight of determining exact beliefs regarding the complicated nature of the Christian God. One group of people within Christianity, the monks, seemed immune to these debates. There was ample room in the deserts of Egypt, Judea, and Syria for varieties of opinion. Some monks believed strongly one way or another regarding doctrines, but the majority seemed to have taken a “live and let live” approach to the broader debates. This attitude worked until Christian leaders began deploying uneducated monks as brute force troops against their opponents and started to force the monks onto sides in the debates. An institution that had been largely immune to the fighting, unified in a collective desire to live apart from mainstream society, was now embroiled in the controversies. Monasteries split along ideological lines; monks exiled and excommunicated each other; monks used violent force against each other. The previous ideal of monastic unity broke.

Enter an anonymous author in the late fifth century who wrote a text of collected sayings ostensibly to teach people how to be monks in this highly charged atmosphere — teaching that relied on an appeal to the past. I argue elsewhere that part of his purpose was to separate monks from the controversies of mainstream Christianity and return them to their unified state of common ascetic practice. The author makes this argument by appealing to the past forms of monasticism and by highlighting them as the better forms. Some sayings speak about the former virtue of monks, arguing that fifth century monks are vastly inferior by comparison. The text tacitly attacks bishops.
and priests, the authorities in mainstream Christianity, by suggesting that they hold no authority over monks or, even worse, are morally inferior to monks. Given the increasing power of bishops in a religion now married to Roman imperial might, the author could not directly attack the imperially backed Christian authorities. So he painted them as inferior by comparison and painted his contemporary monastic society as inferior to the previous iteration in which monks were more unified in practice and less troubled by bishops arguing about the nature of God. The author took a conservative rhetorical turn, desiring to return monasticism to an idealized earlier form in which bishops did not interfere and pull apart the (perhaps fictitious) unity and cohesion of the monastic life. He dissented from contemporary monastic disharmony and, blaming bishops, advocated a tacit return to earlier and seemingly superior social forms.

**CONCLUSION**

From these three examples of dissent literature (Cicero, Plutarch, and fifth century monks) from classical and late antiquity, spanning approximately 550 years, and the example of authoritative literature from the mid-first century CE (Paul’s letter to Corinth), we see that persuasion was a major goal of literature in these periods. The purpose of this literature was not just to change people or minds but also to change how societies were formed. Moreover, the examination of select pieces of dissent literature suggests that dissent in the Roman and Byzantine world was a conservative enterprise intended to return society to a previous iteration or at least to the author’s idealized previous iteration.

So, what do we do with this understanding of authoritative and dissenting literature? Authoritative literature persuades from a position of actual or perceived power. Dissenting literature can persuade by appealing to a mythologized, idealized past. I want to suggest that these two ways of looking at texts—any kind of text, not just written texts—helps us decode social situations and social formations, and the dispositions of the parties producing and using the texts, in all periods of history. What I hope this essay provides is a different framework for approaching texts to understand how the authors desired to form social groups and that these persuasive texts operate with differing toolsets depending on the author’s position as authoritative or dissenting. Reading for persuasion helps decode discourse about social formation by looking at the kind of persuasion deployed. Finally, I offer an initial suggestion about dissent being, counterintuitively, a conservative enterprise. This approach to dissent can help us reframe how we understand dissenting desires for social formation, a formation that is the heart of textual creation in antiquity.
NOTES

1. There is some debate on exactly how much the materials cost. Taking papyrus as an example, see T. C. Skeate, “Was Papyrus Regarded as ‘Cheap’ or ‘Expensive’ in the Ancient World?” *Aegyptus* 75 (1995): 75–93. While it is unclear exactly how much a roll or sheet of papyrus cost in antiquity, Skeate’s research suggests that it was not overly expensive. Costs grew considerably with parchment, but even papyrus was frequently wiped clean and reused (see Chrysi Kotsifou, “Books and Book Production in the Monastic Communities of Byzantine Egypt,” in *The Early Christian Book* [ed. William E. Klingshirn and Linda Safran; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007], 48–66, at 60–63). In any case, Kotsifou claimed that “the prohibitive cost of books encouraged extensive borrowing among readers” (54) — this cost, in my opinion, likely had more to do with the hiring of scribal talent to produce the books than the cost of materials.


4. Ibid., 258–59.


7. Incidental texts, such as receipts or some writing exercises, may be an exception here.


9. Ibid., 52–58.


330: “One defines in terms of a desired effect in a definite situation. Protreptics are just those works that aim to bring about the firm choice of a lived way to wisdom—however different the form of those works and their notions of wisdom might be.”

12. Authors in antiquity were overwhelmingly men, so I use the gendered masculine as shorthand for ancient authors more broadly.

13. Paul explicitly references this request in 1 Corinthians 7:1.

14. See also L. L. Welborn’s argument that, according to Paul, the Jesus Movement group in Corinth ought to represent an alternative political-social ordering to what was present in Corinth (“’How ‘Democratic’ Was the Pauline Εκκλησία? An Assessment with Special Reference to the Christ Groups of Roman Corinth,” New Testament Studies 65 [2019]: 289–309), though the occasion of Paul’s writing was the community’s failing to live up to that expectation in some instances.

15. See, e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:1, 1:14–17, 2:1–2, 3:5–11, 4:15–17, 11:1–2. Others have argued alternatively that Paul was not always writing from a position of authority but was instead seeking to establish that authority. See Antoinette Clark Wire, The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul’s Rhetoric (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990), 1–11; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rhetoric and Ethics: The Politics of Biblical Studies (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 169–70. Whether Paul of Tarsus had actual power or just self-perceived power, he wrote from a position of authority—this is what defines his discourse as authoritative.

16. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Cor 12:12–14, NRSV).

17. As Denise Kimber Buell discussed in Why This New Race, racial and ethnic identities were somewhat fluid, but early Christians (her book primary explores the post-Pauline era) did define themselves more or less as a group that replaced other markers of distinction (Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005]). Much of what she argued may apply to Paul, especially in her summary: “Early Christian universalizing claims can be fruitfully understood in terms of local attempts to negotiate and construct collective identities in a complex socio-rhetorical landscape. In depicting Christianeness as the universal ideal of humanity, early Christians often do so by speaking of Christians as a people distinct from other kinds of peoples” (Ibid., 164). While her exploration in this book
is post-Pauline, we may say similar things about Paul’s attempts in 1 Corinthians to make Christianity a universal, and exclusive, identity.


20. If Louis H. Feldman was correct about the success of Jews gaining converts or sympathizers (Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 288–382), this may have been one reason for Paul’s deemphasis of ethnic or religious identity and his emphasizing the newer identity of Jesus-follower—he was competing against religion and cult for the bodies and minds of his people, including competing against other Jewish groups in the Diaspora (see also Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean*, 381–95, esp. 385–89).

21. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28, NRSV). οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαίος οὐδὲ Ἕλλην, οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος, οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ· πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (Gal 3:28, NA27). I disagree slightly with Denise Kimber Buell and Caroline Johnson Hodge’s reading of Paul in Galatians 3 (“The Politics of Interpretation,” 235–51). They argued that Paul reoriented “gentiles” or “Greeks” into an ethnic identity that preserved their previous distinctiveness while also creating new kinships in the community that tied them to Jewish (whom the authors retranslate as “Judean”) community members. The result, according to Kimber Buell and Johnson Hodge, is that ethnic identities are not eliminated by Christian identity but that Christianity modifies that ethnicity (at least for the Greeks). Alain Badiou similarly argued that the universalizing impulse in Paul did not remove the reality of human particularities, nor did Paul intend it to (*Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* [trans. Ray Brassier; Cultural Memory in the Present; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], esp. 98–111). While they may be correct, all three seem not to recognize that the result was that the previous ethnic identity ceased to exist—in effect, the previous ethnic identity was destroyed in favor of the newly reoriented identity (Christian). Paul did use what Kimber Buell termed “ethnic reasoning” in order to define the Christian group, but I contend that that reasoning damaged the previous ethnic identities and that the most damaged in the Corinthian context was the minority identity. After modification, the old ethnic form was no more. This view
is part of the line taken by Daniel Boyarin (*A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994]).

22. Daniel Boyarin argued in his book *Border Lines* that the distinctions between “Judaism” and “Christianity” in the early centuries of the common era were imposed and that there was not a natural progression of Christianity away from Judaism (*Border Lines: The Partition of Judaean-Christianity* [Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004]). Part of the dissolution involved defining who was and who was not considered authoritative in the diverging intellectual traditions, as well as which ideas were considered authentic to the expression of each religious movement, often in opposition to a constructed version of the “other” religious group (see, e.g., ibid., 37–86). Thus the formation of Christianity and Judaism as distinctive traditions may be considered double-destructive—destroying the actual in order to construct the counterpoint against which one would argue and in that argument outlining the borders so strongly that other possibilities could not exist in the newly defined territory.

23. Helpful here are Michel Foucault’s 1978 lectures about the techniques deployed by systems (including political and religious) to ensure human subjects operated in specific ways within those systems, ways designed to protect and perpetuate the systems (Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978* [ed. Michel Senellart; trans. Graham Burchell; New York: Picador, 2007]). He discussed how “counter-conduct” arose as a way to work against the systems designed to direct human conduct (Ibid., 194–204). Systems for conducting human life depend on the deployment of power on the subjects being conducted—the power to tell people how to behave. Foucault explored this deployment of power to conduct human life in two realms, institutional Christianity and political governing, and in each there was an unequal power distribution that created authority to force the adherence of the majority by the minority. The authority of the minority forced the creation of subjects and societies comprised by the majority. Inherent in creating one system of behavior is the automatic negation of other behaviors, resulting in the creation of counter-conducts that encompass some part of those other possible behaviors. The people and community formed by operations of power to control conduct destroys the other forms of being a subject or subjects in community—power forces compliance, negating or making dangerous any forms of noncompliance. Counter-conduct, to use Foucault’s term, is the dissent to the systems of power that engage authoritative discourse and actions and attempt to destroy other ways of conducting selves.


26. E.g., *De Off.* 1.8.26, 1.14.43, 2.7.23.

27. Ibid., 3.1.2.

28. Ibid., 3.1.3 (*sceleratorum quibus omnia redundant*).

29. Ibid., 1.10.32 (*Iam illis promissis standum non esse quis non uidet quae coactus quis metu quae deceptus dolo promiserit.)*

30. Andrew R. Dyck argued that Cicero wrote for both his son and the Roman youth who would undertake public life (*A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996], 10–16, 29–36). I add that Cicero seemed also to consider his political opponents a secondary audience, attempting to persuade them back to what he considered the correct social order.

31. Octavian eventually allied fully with Mark Antony and M. Lepidus, ending the Republic and forming an official, legal triumvirate of dictators in late 43 BCE (see Mitchell, *Cicero*, 317–24). The triumvirs ordered Cicero’s execution, which took place on 7 December 43 BCE.

32. Even Cicero’s condemnations of others from history followed a similar pattern—they were condemned because they broke with the old or ideal (moral) models.

33. *De Off.* 2.8.26–27 (*Verum tamen quam diu imperium populi Romani beneficiis tenebatur non iniurias bella aut pro sociis aut de imperio gerebatur exitus erant bellorum aut mites aut necessarii regum populorum nationum portus erat et refugium senatus nostri autem magistratus imperatores que ex hac una re maximum laudem capere studebant si provincias si socios aequitate et fide defendissent. Itaque illud patrocinium orbis terrae uerius quam imperium poterat nominari.*).

34. See *De Off.* 2.13.45. On the civil war, including Cicero’s own complicated involvement and Caesar’s rise as a despot and assassination, see Mitchell, *Cicero*, 236–72.

35. *De Off.* 2.8.29 (*parietes modo urbis stant et manent . . . rem uero publicam penitus amimus.*)

36. Ibid., 3.22.88.


38. Ibid., 3.30.110 (*Quare ex multis mirabilibus exemplis haud facile quis dixerit hoc exemplo aut laudabilius aut praestantius.*).

39. Ibid., 3.31.111 (*Nam quod reddi nobis nunc mirabile uidetur illis quidem temporibus aliter facere non potuit. Itaque ista laus non est hominis sed temporum.*).
40. Ibid., 3.6.26 (Ergo unum debet esse omnibus propositum ut eadem sit utilitas unius-cuiusque et uniuvserum quam si ad se quisque rapiet dissoluetur omnis humana consortio).


42. While there has been some debate over Plutarch’s authorship of the *Sayings*, I take them as likely genuine. Apart from the contents and theme fitting with Plutarch’s other writings, there appears to be an impulse in the first through third centuries CE to collate the sayings of important figures—other examples include the Christian gospels, Diogenes Laertius, and *Pirke Avot*.

43. *Moria* 172C–D.

44. For example, see the five dozen additional sayings for Agesilaus the Great in the *Sayings of Spartans* (Ibid., 208B–215A) compared to the dozen Agesilaus sayings in *Sayings of Kings* (Ibid., 109F–191D).

45. Ibid., 172E.

46. Ibid., 208A.

47. Ibid., 172D–E.

48. Ibid., 179D (τί δ’ ἐφέλον . . . ἐὰν ἐχω μὲν πολλά πράξω δὲ μηδέν); translation my own.

49. At a series of meetings between 325 and 451 CE, Christianity established particular doctrines about God that some leaders considered unacceptable. Those who did not agree to the new, somewhat sui generis ideas were cut off from the “mainstream” communities or, in the worst cases, exiled.

50. Foucault saw early Christian ascetics as an example of counter-conduct (*Security, Territory*, 204–8).

51. Examine, for example, the *Life of Antony* compared to the *Epistles* of Antony—in the former, the episcopal author Athanasius constructed an Antony who cared deeply about correct belief, whereas the letters suggest an Antony who gave less thought to such things. See Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); and David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). On monastic desire to remain out of Christian conflicts more broadly, see William Harmless, “Desert Silence: Why the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is Reticent about Christology” (appendix to *Augustine on Heart and Life: Essays in Memory of William Harmless*, S.J.; ed. John J. O’Keefe and Michael Cameron; http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/toc/SS15.html). For an overview of some of the conflicts and some of the violence, see Zachary B. Smith, *Philosopher-Monks, Episcopal Authority, and the Care of the Self: The Apophthegmata Patrum in Fifth-Century Palestine* (Instrumenta Patristica and Mediaevalia 80; Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 36–47.

52. Smith, *Philosopher-Monks*. 
53. In at least Cicero’s case, one may even trace his conservatism to his political patrons, who desired to maintain control over the Republic in the hands of a very few powerful people (see Thomas N. Mitchell, Cicero: The Ascending Years [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979], 10–51).

54. A good overview of appeals to the past in Roman literature at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire may be found in Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Rome’s Cultural Revolution (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 213–58. Wallace-Hadrill demonstrates how both the republicans and Augustus appealed to the past to support their arguments about the present and future governance of Rome.