The Gospel of Judas: Gnostic Influences on the Definition of Orthodox Christianity

“It will open up new vistas for understanding Jesus and the religious movement he founded,” claims Dr. Bart Ehrman, professor of religious studies. Ehrman bestowed this controversial honor upon the gospel of Judas, recently translated to English in 2006. While Christians have cherished and revered Jesus as the savior that has saved mankind from sin’s wages of eternal torment, they have also traditionally reviled Judas as the quintessential villain. In similar form, the gospel of Judas pays homage to Jesus and his role in the salvation of humanity, but it holds itself in stark contrast by depicting Judas as the primary hero in its narrative. During the first and second centuries, Christianity housed diverse philosophies, including orthodoxy and Gnosticism. The orthodox Christians more closely resemble what is familiar Christianity today; they believe in Jesus as Christ\(^1\) and God, the divine savior of humanity come to rescue Man from his sinful nature, rebuilding the broken relationship between Man and his God. The Gnostics, however, viewed not only Jesus as divine, but people as well. Men containing a remnant of a “divine spark” – a piece of a god-like being – require secret knowledge to escape from their evil and inferior fleshly prison, and Jesus was the vessel carrying a divine messenger. One group saw mankind as a fallen mortal victim to his own folly, while the other saw mankind as an unwilling and unknowing divine prisoner. In comparing it to other Gnostic texts contained in the \textit{Nag Hammadi}\(^2\), the gospel of

\(^{1}\) The word “Christ” is derived from the Greek word \textit{Christos}, the equivalent to the Hebrew word for \textit{messiah}. Directly translated, it means “anointed one.” While the most common interpretation of the word is savior, the ancient Jews thought of the \textit{messiah} as being a mortal who God would choose to rule His future kingdom on earth – they did not anticipate the \textit{messiah} being God himself (Ehrman 158).

\(^{2}\) The \textit{Nag Hammadi} is an ancient Egyptian papyri codex, or handwritten book of Scriptures, discovered in 1945 containing a variety of Gnostic manuscripts such as the Apocalypse of Peter and the gospel of Thomas.
Judas falls under Gnostic theology, with its repeated references to Barbelo, aeons, and Yaoldaabooth\(^3\) and its focus on esoteric knowledge over repentance from iniquity and obedience to God. Though both Gnostics\(^4\) and orthodox are housed under the identity of “Christian,” the Gnostics acted as a counterpublic within this larger community, rejected as an aberrant sect for their alternative theology. The gospel of Judas is a counterargument against this estrangement and acts as a medium through which the Gnostic author can voice Gnostic grievances and discredit the authority of the orthodox Christian public. While the gospel of Judas has been successful in revealing the dichotomy between Christian public and counterpublic sympathies, it has consistently failed to significantly deter the development and success of Christianity as it is known now. However, it has served a unique role in forcing Christians, in early centuries, to establish a coherent canon and, in more contemporary times, to establish the historical credibility of the Bible.

Gnostics held a unique relationship with the Christians; though they shared many of the same customs integrated with the Christian public, they acted as a counterpublic through their convictions. They honored Jesus as divine; Judas, the hero of his own gospel, imparts this sentiment when he tells Jesus solemnly, “…you are from the immortal realm of Barbelo” (Gospel of Judas 35). By identifying Jesus as originating from this domain, Judas claims that Jesus belongs only among the most preeminent of spiritual beings. The difference, however, lies in the degree to which each group honors the man. While orthodox Christians worship Jesus as God the savior incarnate, Christian Gnostics revered him as the ultimate purveyor of \textit{gnosis}. Additionally, the four canonical gospels are structured such that Jesus’ death and resurrection are the culmination of purpose for the overall narrative; Judas’ betrayal of Jesus – or

\(^3\) Barbelo is one Gnostic name given to the mother god (Kasser, Meyer, Wurst 23). Barbelo is responsible for having given birth to the aeons, or minor gods and heavenly beings, Yaldabaooth being among them. The latter is the ignorant, flawed being responsible for the creation of the mortal universe (37).

\(^4\) Note that the words “Gnosticism” and “orthodox” are in themselves scholarly constructs used to facilitate discussion of ancient Christianity (Townsend, Iricinschi, Jenott 33). Gnosticism, though its roots unclear, is understood to be extremely complex and multifarious, and not all Gnostics were Christians per se, as the essential details of their beliefs do not necessitate Jesus as a central figure. The term “Gnosticism” was created by scholars to describe the community that believed in \textit{gnosis}, the corruption of this world and its maker, and the existence of a superior god and his heavenly children, called aeons. “Orthodoxy” means “right belief”; for the purposes of discussion, it signifies the collection of basic Christian beliefs associated with today’s Christianity: Jesus Christ is God, he died on the cross as a sacrifice for humanity’s sins, and he was resurrected from death because he was himself sinless.
“handing over” of Jesus, as is meticulously argued by scholars – is the consummation of his gospel. It is interesting to note that the concluding titular phrase of the book is “the gospel of Judas,” as opposed to “the gospel according to Judas,” as it would be phrased canonically. Judas is the focus, not Jesus, because he is the individual who comes to a complete understanding of true *gnosis*: sending Jesus to his death is the ultimate act of obedience to his master (Ehrman 138). Other similarities include some shared Scriptures, especially books like the gospel of John, in which Jesus is portrayed as a divine man come to reveal the truth about how mankind may escape the vices of this world (58). They also exhorted an ascetic morality, endorsing restraint from lust, theft, and greed, among other behaviors (61). Although orthodoxy espoused morality as a contrast to sin, which is displeasing and incompatible to God’s perfection, Gnostics behaved righteously out of a conviction that the physical universe is inferior and degraded; at worst, the universe was viewed as corrupt and degenerate.

Simply by laying claim to Jesus as a central figure to their theology while holding such contrary views, Christian Gnostics made a statement against orthodox. The gospel of Judas is a Gnostic gospel written for the entire composite of the Christian community. Although its precise authorship is unclear, scholars project that the gospel was first written in Greek between 140-160 AD (Ehrman 102). It is an apocryphal gospel, meaning it was never integrated into Biblical canon, as its contents were not generally accepted by the Christian public. One distinct doctrinal difference between the two sects is the concept of *gnosis*, or secret knowledge, which is the essential theme of Gnostic teachings; it is the key with which mankind can escape this world of matter for the superior and ethereal world he was made for. Thus, the narrative style of the gospel is quite distinct from those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John: rather than focusing on the happenings surrounding Jesus’ itinerate ministry, it emphasizes above everything else the *gnosis* Jesus passes down to the apostle Judas, and the close mentor-mentee relationship shared between these two men, as is evidenced by the gospel’s description of itself as a “secret account of revelation that

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5 “Paradidomi” is the Greek word used in the gospel accounts to describe Judas’ betrayal of Jesus. Interestingly enough, some scholars propose that this word does not carry any negative connotation, contrary to the word “betray,” which is commonly used in translation. This suggests a definition of history on the part of the Christian public, in choosing to portray Judas as insidious or petty rather than innocent. However, some prominent Christian theologians did defend Judas Iscariot’s character, such as Origen in his commentaries on John and Matthew.
Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot” (Kasser et al 19). This different focus combines Jesus with Gnostic teaching, contending with orthodoxy that they could be incorrect in their interpretation of Jesus. While the document contains metaphysical theology that may have been edifying to fellow Gnostics, it is also permeated by counterargument that was meant to be read by the Christian public who placed this group into the position of counterpublic by ostracizing it. Similar to the way in which the Orthodox Church excluded Judas as a legitimate apostle, it excluded the Christian Gnostics, making outsiders out of nominal insiders.

Very early in its development, the Christian public was forced to grapple and cope with the issue of martyrdom; Christians came to associate their own suffering with that of Christ, a perspective that came to be critiqued by Gnostics. The Roman community distrusted Christians who proclaimed Jesus as their king and refused to pay obeisance to the Roman gods. Christians typically remained low-profile, and thus did not often bring their ideas into the public square, but simply by refusing to conform they exhibited countercultural behavior. As scholar Elaine Pagels points out, sacrifice to the gods was irrevocably connected to the Roman public’s values and virtues; sacrifices symbolized loyalty to both the family and the state (44). Such omission of piety, therefore, was construed not only as defiance against the Roman gods, but as rejection of the Roman community and Emperor himself. Officials and locals alike would alienate, torture, and execute Christians⁶ for refusing to denounce Jesus and worship Roman gods. Although relatively few Christians were actually killed during the first two centuries, Christians were acutely aware of the countercultural nature of their beliefs and came to glorify those who endured persecution for the sake of their faith in Jesus (47). Although feared, the danger of persecution was viewed as appropriate, for the Christians took to heart Jesus’ comfort that, “if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18), likening his followers to himself. By adopting an accepting

⁶ An often cited example of Christian persecution comes out of a poetic account by the Christian historian Eusebius, who documents the “persecution of Lyons in 177” as a specific event. It is almost unanimously accepted in scholarly circles that this event happened, but some have suggested that because Eusebius is our only source of knowledge for such a horrific event, it may be a fabrication (Thompson 361). Whether or not this specific instance in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastic History* is reliable, enough documentation of Christian persecution exists to show that this group did indeed experience forms of violent oppression.
disposition toward persecution and abuse, Christians hoped to worship Jesus by “taking up the cross” and sharing in his suffering. The Gnostics disapproved of this willingness to sacrifice life to honor God, especially when Christians took such pride in their liberation from the Jewish sacrificial system (Pagels 50).

The tendency to glorify and encourage facing death for the sake of faith is harshly criticized within the gospel of Judas through the use of Jesus’ authority to Christians and through a positive portrayal of Judas. In one part of the narrative, the disciples recount to Jesus a disturbing vision of the Jewish temple: twelve priests are identified as performing “a multitude of sins and lawlessness,” among them sacrifices of their own children and wives (Gospel of Judas 38). Jesus interprets the vision, saying, “Those you have seen receiving the offerings at the altar – that is who you are. That is the god you serve…The cattle you have seen…are the many people you lead astray before the altar” (39-40). Through Jesus’ quotations, the Gnostic author rebukes the orthodox for essentially sacrificing their brethren like animals, as in the old tradition. It is clear that this section of the gospel is intended to be a counterargument to contemporary concerns, rather than the official word of God; the Passion⁷ had not yet occurred, and the disciples, having lived their lives as orthodox Jews, would have no conception of offering themselves as a sacrifice to appease God. Consequently, it is unlikely that Jesus and his disciples realistically held this conversation. Thus, the purpose of the text is not necessarily to relay an accurate portrait of what interaction Jesus conducted with his disciples, but rather to saliently deliver the point that such martyrdom of unwitting victims is detestable. By using Jesus, the central authority of Christianity, as the speaker of public criticism, the gospel serves as a very direct attack on the practices of the public.

Gnostics did not reject the martyrs themselves; the metaphor of animal sacrifice associated with church leadership’s endorsement of martyrdom depicts martyrs as misled victims. Additionally, martyrs are honored when they die for what the Gnostics perceive to be a good cause; Judas recounts a dream in which he is persecuted by the other apostles, and Jesus informs him that this is because he is superior

⁷ The “Passion” is a term used for Christ’s crucifixion, referring to the unconditional love with which he gave himself to death for the sake of mankind.
(Gospel of Judas 44-45). In addition to a counterargument, the gospel offers a counterexample – a role model of what a martyr should be. Judas is fully informed of the purpose of his impending persecution, and is fully certain that his death is necessary to achieve a good cause (Kasser, Meyer, Wurst 43). He is not blindly led by erroneous leaders, but rather enlightened by gnosis.

The arguments orthodoxy presented against the gospel’s criticism of its stance on martyrdom served as a step in articulating and developing a more coherent picture of what Christianity stood for. In the midst of widespread Christian martyrdom Irenaeus of Lyons, bishop of Gaul, was prompted to write Adversus Haereses, the first extensive refutation of the Gnostics and our primary source for an external mentioning of the gospel of Judas. Although Irenaeus was not officially commissioned to write the polemic, he found it necessary, for “if one needs to die for one’s faith, one had better know what faith is, and not die for a heretical or false version of it” (Ehrman 56). It is important to note Irenaeus’ choice in how he exerts his efforts – rather than writing an encouragement to his fellow orthodox Christians to be strong and courageous under the stress of persecution, he chooses instead to write an extensive treatise instructing his brethren in discerning between the truth and the ignorance of gnosis (Irenaeus I.31.3). With his role as a religious leader, his heightened sensitivity to alternative doctrine suggests immediately what was commonly accepted belief and Scripture. Irenaeus integrates his rebuttal to the gospel of Judas into his deconstruction of Gnosticism. Irenaeus’ argument comes in the form of an interpretation of Jesus’ authoritative words, taken predominantly from the gospel of Matthew, which rebuke the Gnostics as mistaken. In his apologetics contending for Jesus’ singular identity as God in-the-flesh, he identifies the Gnostics as denied salvation by Christ, referring to them as, “these men… [that] [speak of Him] as having relinquished the dispensation of suffering,” and speaking as if this sense of freedom from suffering is a

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8 Gaul is the name given to the region that today consists of France, Belgium, western Germany, and northern Italy. Lyons was located approximately in central France. Irenaeus is one of the early church fathers most closely associated with the refutation of Gnosticism.
9 Also known as Against All Heresies or, more completely, On the Refutation and Overthrow of Gnosis, Falsely So-called. It consists of five books, each containing at least twenty-five chapters.
10 Interesting commentary suggests that Irenaeus’ strong reverence of martyrs stems from the violent death of his mentor, Polycarp, who was publically burned alive for adhering to his creed (Pagels 48).
11 Apologetics, originating from the word apologia, refers to “the written defense or justification of the opinions or conduct of a writer, speaker, etc.” (Oxford English Dictionary).
detestable stance to take (Irenaeus 3.18.5). If Jesus commanded his disciples to “take up the cross and follow Him,” and if he asserts that “whosoever will lose [their life] shall find it,” then Irenaeus’ logical corollary is that those who seek to preserve their own lives and avoid suffering are disobeying God’s word (Matt. 16:25). He then asserts that the opposition revile and slander the actual martyrs themselves, and likens the martyrs to Jesus, as they, “follow the footprints of the Lord's passion, having become martyrs of the suffering One” (Irenaeus 3.18.5) As a result of such rhetoric, one is led to conclude that those at odds with mainstream Christianity not only disregard Jesus’ words, but that they hold an outright contempt for his sacrifice on the cross, by rejecting the sacrifices of Jesus’ followers. By basing his argument on Scripture, Irenaeus focuses the image of what Christianity stands for; his citations in Matthew against arguments in the gospel of Judas suggest that the gospel of Matthew is reliable and containing God’s truth, while also suggesting that Judas’ gospel does not, overshadowing any erroneous judgments made of the Gnostics. By pushing Gnostics farther into the margins as an aberrant counterpublic sect, the Christian public becomes more distinct.

Continuing the ancient debate, a similar counterargument develops after the rediscovery of the gospel of Judas; the form of this argument demonstrates that such historical scrutiny applied by critics of Christianity goes beyond scholarly inquiry, and is also as driven by personal conviction as those arguments deployed by the Gnostic author. Although the counterpublic has changed from a religious faction to a community of intellectual skeptics, it still utilizes the gospel of Judas as a conduit of belying the authority of Christianity. An extant copy of the gospel of Judas was discovered near Cairo, Egypt, contained in a papyri collection called the Codex Tchacos. This copy is in the ancient Egyptian Coptic language of the region and is dated at approximately 280AD\textsuperscript{12}. The process of ascertaining the manuscript’s origins has confirmed its identity, supporting the claim that “a lost Gospel…had been found” (Ehrman 7). While it is reasonably indubitable that this manuscript is an authentic document that truly contains the gospel Irenaeus referred to in Adversus Haereses, contemporary members of the

\textsuperscript{12} The age of Codex Tchacos was determined through carbon dating, the type of ink and parchment used, the style of writing, and references within the text made to the book of Acts and the gospel of Matthew (Ehrman 7).
counterpublic, such as Bart Ehrman, have construed the text to carry historical authority in determining the identities Jesus, Judas, and his disciples. He elevates the gospel of Judas by asserting that it “turns the theology of traditional Christianity on its head and reverses everything we ever thought about the nature of true Christianity” (Kasser, Meyer, Wurst 119). However, such a tremendous statement cannot be so lightly imputed to a manuscript, especially when it seems to borrow phrases from the gospel of Matthew and the book of Acts (Gathercole 214). Such dependence on canonical Scripture weakens the idea that this gospel is completely subversive to Christianity, as it implies that the gospel is not actually contributing anything to the historical understanding of Biblical characters. Additionally, scholar Simon Gathercole takes issue with the gospel’s complete silence concerning Jesus’ identity as a Jewish man (214). Such an omission does nothing to contribute to the collective understanding of the historical Jesus; while it may be argued that this omission is due to a conviction that Jesus was really merely a vessel of a divine entity too wise for Jewish traditions, this still does not change the fact that the gospel fails to expand on the image of the Jesus that walked the earth. Ehrman’s readiness to attribute such a sweeping implication to the discovery of this text is a dramatic contrast to the manner in which he describes canon selection; he nonchalantly mentions that “there were lots of gospels” and emphasizes the originally anonymous authorship of Biblical gospels and that their claim to the apostles were commonplace (Kasser, Meyer, Wurst 117). Such language suggests that the books ultimately chosen for the Bible are illegitimate – anything but the divine word of God. His assertions are made in the face of unknown authorship of the Judas gospel and its strongly suspected dependence on New Testament material, revealing a modern bias for counterargument against orthodoxy.

In addition to giving the benefit of the doubt to the historical reliability of the Judas gospel, individuals of the counterpublic argue that the gospel of Judas is equitable to all other gospels composed in this approximate time period. This argument is made in order to demonstrate that Christianity’s foundation, the Bible, is not the divine word of God, but rather an amalgamation of the victories of orthodox men, thus stripping the faith of spiritual credibility, eliciting a response from the Christian public. Elaine Pagels postulates the thesis that “the author of the Gospel of Judas is merely doing what
other Christians did,” and that this author was active in an internal struggle within the Christian community for power and recognition (34). She gives evidence of this power struggle in canonical writings, citing the conflicting exchanges among the gospels of Matthew, Luke, John, and even Thomas and Mary, all debating the superior leadership role attributed to the apostle Peter (34-37). However, this is not entirely applicable. Upon comparing the arguments presented by the authors of these works with the argument contained the gospel of Judas, it is apparent that the Gnostic argument in this text is speaking from the perspective of the “insider made outsider” (Scholer). While these other gospels are argumentative with each other, they share the same basic theology and similar sentiments toward Jesus, Judas, and the apostles. The gospel of Judas, however, is set apart immediately because it focuses on the most controversial subject of all, Judas; the other gospels centered on characters that were viewed positively by the Christian public. Further distancing the gospel from canonical writings, Gathercole asserts that the Gnostics and orthodox likely did not consider themselves belonging to one cumulative group, and thus the author of the Judas gospel likely did not intend for his writing to be included in the official doctrine of the Christian public (Gathercole 213). The counterargument structure of the gospel adds further credibility to this idea. The gospel of Judas contains rhetoric that addresses specific concerns: the problem of martyrdom in the second century and the source of authority for the Christian church. By protesting orthodoxy and its practices, the gospel functions more as an editorial than a Scripture to be abided by. Though it does offer an account of Gnostic theology, this is done in the context of Judas’ superiority, a choice that is defiant by nature. The gospel also contains glaring anachronisms. For example, the disciples are partaking in a Eucharistic rite in the very first scene of the gospel (Gospel of Judas 34). The Eucharist was not established until the century after Jesus’ death, and thus would have been unknown to his disciples. The presence of such historical error suggests that this document was intended to be provocative enough to garner Christian attention and prove a point more than to act as a

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13 William Klassen, in a review by David Scholer, remarks that the canonical gospels marginalize Judas such that he is an “insider made outsider” – he is among the twelve, and yet he is always identified apart from the group as a traitor, not belonging to Jesus’ closest band of disciples and friends. Similarly, the Christian Gnostics are marginalized by the Christian public as a group that does not belong, despite their reverence of Jesus and approval of similar customs.
timeless standard. Thus, although such Christian rebuttals do not prove that Scripture is the word of God, they do suggest that more factors must be considered when proposing the determinants of canon.

Ancient Gnostic texts such as the gospel of Judas have been used as counterarguments against Christianity both in their original contexts and in their modern rediscovery. However, such arguments and their rebuttals from Christians are usually self-fulfilling – they serve to reassure the convictions or biases previously held by a certain audience. Scholars such as Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels approach Christianity with a critical eye, and thus a gospel supporting Judas, the supposed antithesis of Jesus, will be viewed as a boon of evidence against Christianity. By accepting the Gnostic perspective of Judas’ heroism, these individuals act as Christianity’s counterpublic. Individuals representing the Christian public such as Irenaeus and Simon Gathercole tend to be much more skeptical of the text’s far-reaching implications. However, by reacting to the counterarguments proposed by their counterpublic, the individuals comprising the Christian public are unified. In having to defend the faith, they are required to define what should be used to define truth and what should not. Since the public and counterpublic seem to argue past each other, one valuing one set of evidence over another, the argument concerning the legitimacy of Christianity will continue, with the true identity of such characters as Judas hanging in the balance.
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The Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic gospel. The content consists of conversations between Jesus and Judas Iscariot. Given that it includes late 2nd century theology, it is thought to have been composed in the 2nd century by Gnostic Christians, rather than the historic Judas himself. The only copy of it known to exist is a Coptic language text that has been carbon dated to 280 AD, plus or minus 60 years. It has been suggested that the text derives from an earlier manuscript in the Greek language. An Charlotte Anderson Professor Susan Morse Honors Humanities Core Discussion June 6, 2008. The Gospel of Judas: Gnostic Influences on the Definition of Orthodox Christianity "It will open up new vistas for understanding Jesus and the religious movement he founded," claims Dr. Bart Ehrman, professor of religious studies. Ehrman bestowed this controversial honor upon the gospel of Judas, recently translated to English in 2006. While Christians have cherished and revered Jesus as the savior that has saved mankind from sin's wages of eternal torment, they have also traditionally reviled Judas as th