

WENDT'S UNTRANSLATED VOLUME

ON THE TEACHING OF CHRIST.

“BACK to Christ” is the watchword or theology at the present time; and there can be little doubt that the question, what precisely was taught by Christ, will be the most burning theological topic of the first decade of the twentieth century.

It seems an easy thing to discover what Christ taught, or in the four Gospels all His words are contained within a very narrow compass. In other writings stray utterances of His may be discovered, but they are exceedingly rare, and do not in the least modify the general impression of His teaching. The question, however, has been raised: Are we sure that all the words attributed to our Lord in the Gospels are really His; or, as we read, do we require to exercise caution and criticism?

Wendt's well-known book is at present our most detailed and handy account of the teaching of Jesus. But, in true German fashion, Wendt began with a thorough investigation of the record of our Lord's teaching in the Gospels, proceeding on the maxim that you cannot be sure what ideas are to be attributed to anyone till you have ascertained the amount of credit due to the documents in which they are contained. This preliminary volume has not been translated—the publishers apparently believing, perhaps with wisdom, that it would not be acceptable to the British public. But it is a book of three hundred and fifty closely printed pages, and a sketch of its contents will show,

perhaps more clearly than anything else, where advanced scholarship stands at present in relation to this question.

Wendt begins with a description of what he obviously believes to have been the course of the life of Jesus. He says it forms the framework of St. Mark, the oldest of our Gospels.

It is as follows: Jesus at first was neither recognised by others as the Messiah nor expressly known to be such by Himself. He deliberately held back the public proclamation of His Messianic title, and only at a comparatively late period of His career received from His disciples an acknowledgment of His dignity. Not till the very end was at hand did He permit the open acknowledgment of the fact or come forward with a claim to it Himself. St. Mark gives no hint that the Baptist knew or pointed out Jesus as the Messiah. According to his account, John indeed made known that the Messiah was about to appear, but not that Jesus was the Messiah; and at the baptism the vision of the dove was seen by Jesus alone, as He alone heard the voice by which He was designated the Son of God. St. Mark then describes how, on commencing His public work, Jesus was recognised as the Son of God—that is, the Messiah—only by the demoniacs, whom, however, He sternly forbade to make Him known. The rest of the people, on the contrary, when they beheld His extraordinary works, at first inquired in bewilderment what was the significance of His activity and His person; and then, when they had had time to think, formed and uttered their opinions about Him—these, however, being such as involved a complete denial of His Messianic dignity or, while acknowledging that He was sent of God, yet withheld the full acknowledgment. St. Mark gives prominence to the scene in which, in contrast with this behaviour of the multitude, the apostles, through the mouth of St. Peter,

gave expression to their conviction that he was the Messiah; and he sets in the fullest light his sense of the importance of this epoch-making incident by making Jesus, from this point onwards, introduce a new element into His teaching—the prediction, namely, of His own sufferings and the sufferings of those who confessed Him. Meantime, however, He sternly forbade the Twelve to make known the conclusion at which they had arrived; and, in accordance with this, the first outside the circle of the Twelve who publicly named Jesus the Son of David—the blind beggar, Bartimæus, at Jericho—was commanded by the apostles to hold his peace. At this point, however, Jesus withdrew the seal of silence and immediately thereafter accepted the Messianic homage of the pilgrims, as He entered Jerusalem. This decided His fate with the hierarchy; and at last, in presence of the high priest, Jesus solemnly claimed the Messianic dignity. St. Mark closes his account of the life of Christ with the story of how the heathen centurion, seeing His behaviour on the cross, exclaimed, “Truly this was the Son of God.”

This, according to St. Mark—and Wendt enthusiastically adopts it—was the outline of Christ’s life; but, strange to say, the evangelist does not adhere to it himself. It is only by piecing certain parts together from his Gospel that you ascertain that this was the real course of events. These pieces, we can yet see, were originally joined; for the ending of one runs into the opening of the next, when what comes between in the actual St. Mark is removed. The evangelist has allowed the historical outline to be crossed and blurred by a series of accounts of conflicts between Jesus and the hierarchy. This section also is cut up into fragments, which are scattered over the Gospel; but in the same way we can see, from the endings and beginnings of the different parts, that they originally formed a single whole. There is a third series, treated in the

same way, which consists of passages setting forth the necessity and the value of suffering. And there are two other smaller series, which need not be further particularised.

Wendt does not hold that these different series of passages were different documents, which St. Mark incorporated in his narrative: the stamp of the same authorship is too unmistakably on them all for this. He falls back on the old statement of Papias: that St. Mark derived his information from St. Peter: and he believes that these series represent different discourses of St. Peter, or different groups of reminiscences which the apostle was in the habit of delivering together in St. Mark's hearing. Thus there was one discourse in which St. Peter used to give the historical framework of Christ's life; then there was another in which he used to give a collection of anecdotes illustrative of the witty and pithy replies wherewith Jesus confounded opponents; and there was a series of sayings, enclosed within an outline of incident, in which were predicted the sufferings certain to follow the confession of Christ; and so on. St. Mark had these separately in his mind, but he had to combine them into a book; and, not being a man of letters, he did it clumsily; and criticism has to take the patchwork asunder and restore the pieces to the places which they occupied as they came from the lips of St. Peter.

Observe this, however: these Petrine reminiscences do not make up the whole of St. Mark's Gospel. The evangelist incorporated other materials, derived from sources to us unknown but scarcely likely to be of the same dignity. And it is noteworthy that among the additions Wendt reckons some of the greatest miracles of our Lord—such as the Stilling of the Storm and the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

Wendt's treatment of the Gospel of St. John is of a startling character, but it is carried through with great boldness and ability. He discerns in this Gospel two totally distinct hands, not to speak of a third, to which the last chapter is due.

One of the writers is St. John himself. Wendt believes that the apostle was persuaded in his old age to collect his reminiscences, and these form the substance of the present Gospel. They consisted chiefly of sayings and discourses, perhaps bound together by a few slight threads of narrative; but no attempt was made by the apostle to give a connected life of Christ. This attempt was, however, made and carried through by a disciple of St. John, who incorporated the reminiscences of his master with his own ideas and fitted the whole within a historical framework.

In proof that the bulk of the Fourth Gospel is due to St. John, Wendt adduces the words of the Prologue—which, by the way, is not the work of the editor, but the apostle—“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth.” Further, the language throughout is that of a Hebrew, who had been brought up on the Septuagint. Especially by the sovereign way in which he makes Jesus handle the Old Testament the writer shows that he must have been in the closest touch with the Lord. It is true, there is a wide discrepancy between the language in which he makes his Master speak and that in which Jesus is made to speak in the Synoptists; but this is sufficiently accounted for by the powerfully developed spiritual individuality of the apostle; and the difference is confined to the form of Christ's words: it does not extend to the substance, which is identical with that found in the Synoptists. Of this Wendt has given detailed proof in the second—that is, the translated—part of his work. So, John has a peculiar vocabulary; but its leading

catchwords are simply equivalents for the leading catchwords of the Synoptists; and the circle of Christ's teaching in St. John, when laid above the circle found in the Synoptists, corresponds with it point by point, although, of course, at some points St. John is more expansive and goes deeper.

Wendt's account of the other writer whose hand is discernible in the Fourth Gospel is a severe one. He expressly exonerates him, indeed, from deliberate falsification; but short of this there is nothing of which the bungler is not capable.

He has entirely obliterated the historicity of the career of Jesus, as criticism is able to exhibit it by judicious excerpts from St. Mark. This career began in obscurity; for a long time Christ performed His acts of healing in secret and suppressed every allusion to His Messiahship; the confession of the Twelve that He was the Messiah was the great crisis; thereafter only did Jesus venture to speak of His sufferings and death; and only towards or at the very end did He permit the Messianic dignity to be ascribed to Him or claim it Himself. The author, however, of the Fourth Gospel in its present form introduces allusions to Christ's sufferings and death from the very first, and takes every opportunity of asseverating that Jesus knew from the beginning that He was to be betrayed by one of the Twelve. In like manner he makes the Baptist recognise Jesus as the Messiah, clean against the representation of St. Mark; and as early as the fourth chapter he makes Jesus Himself say in so many words, "I am the Messiah," to a Samaritan woman. Many, indeed, are represented as denying that He is the Messiah; but allusions to the fact that this is His destiny are numerous from the very commencement of His career.

Even this total oblivion of the true course of the history of Jesus is, however, not the worst. This editor's very conception of Christianity is widely different from that of

Christ, which is faithfully reproduced in his own peculiar dialect by St. John. The latter is deep, inward, mystical; the editor's is external and mechanical. For example, in the portions of the Gospel due to the apostle "eternal life" is a present possession of everyone who believeth on the Son of God; but to the editor it is a possession which is to begin in the next world. And, in the same way, "judgment" is in St. John's mouth or Christ's a process which is proceeding now—everyone who comes into contact with Christ is *ipso facto* judged—but to the editor judgment is a public scene, which will take place at the end of time. The same habit of mind is displayed in the way in which the editor relies on external proofs of the divine origin of Christianity. Jesus Himself rebuked the desire of the Jews for signs and refused to give them; but to the editor the miracles are the commanding evidence, and he has a kind of craze for emphasizing the importance of the testimony of the Baptist.

Unfortunately the editor has mixed up his own additions with the material derived from the apostle so closely that it is no easy task to separate the gold from the alloy. He has even intruded into the Prologue, interrupting its glorious march with two or three irrelevant remarks on his favourite topic of the testimony of John. But Wendt is not discouraged. He goes resolutely through chapter after chapter, and excises now a long paragraph, then a verse or two, here a line and there a word; and he seldom has any hesitation. In the first chapter, for example, he cuts away the whole passage in which the Baptist bears testimony to the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, together with the passages thereon ensuing in which St. John and others have their first interview with Jesus amid circumstances which have been supposed to bear marks, tender and unmistakable, of personal recollection. A curious specimen of the results of Wendt's method is found in the

eleventh chapter—the account of the raising of Lazarus. Something proceeding from St. John is here the substratum, but verse by verse it has to be disentangled from the editor's additions. Lazarus had died, and Jesus came a long distance to console the sisters. He naturally talked with them of the certainty that their brother would rise again in the resurrection at the last day; and out of these remarks a story gradually span itself of a resurrection effected by Jesus on the spot; but no such thing really took place.

Wendt is by no means unaware of the reluctance which will be felt by all who are acquainted with the spell of St. John, which appears to pervade every page of the Gospel and lends it a character so unique, to accept the theory of a twofold authorship; but he maintains that only on these terms is it possible to retain the apostolicity of the Gospel as a whole; for the historical framework is such as could have been constructed by no one acquainted at first hand with the course of Christ's career.

Perhaps Wendt's discussion of the First and Third Gospels is the most valuable part of his book.

He holds that both St. Matthew and St. Luke made use of St. Mark as we now have it—the last few verses of the last chapter of course excepted—and on this framework constructed their own narratives. Neither, however, had the discernment to excerpt, as criticism is now able to do, the real course of the history; and, therefore, they also, like the editor of the Fourth Gospel, let the Baptist recognise Jesus as the Messiah; they make Jesus perform miracles from the first in great publicity; and, while retaining the scene in which the Twelve acknowledged the Messianic dignity of their Master, and other scenes in which He forbade them and others to make Him known, they do not recognise the true place and import of these incidents.

St. Matthew and St. Luke, however, display an agreement in incident and expression in the portions of their narratives not derived from St. Mark which requires explanation ; and this is not to be found in the supposition that the one borrowed from the other, because St. Luke, the later of the two, is particularly shy and suspicious of St. Matthew. The explanation then must be that, besides the Gospel of St. Mark, they made use of another common source ; and, going back on the old tradition of Papias, Wendt supposes this to have been the Logia of the apostle Matthew ; for the author of our First Gospel is not St. Matthew, though it bears his name. Just as St. John made a collection of the sayings of the Master, his brother apostle had done the same before him ; and, as St. John's editor transformed his reminiscences into a history of Christ, the authors of the First and Third Gospels did the like with the Logia of St. Matthew. Only, while the editor of St. John derived his framework from the tradition of the life of Christ current in the neighbourhood of Ephesus at the close of the first century, the other two evangelists derived theirs from St. Mark.

The first and third evangelists made their excerpts from the Logia somewhat differently. The writer of the First Gospel, following his plan of grouping miracles, parables, etc., together, attached as many of them as he could, on this principle, to the materials which he borrowed from St. Mark. St. Luke, on the contrary, interpolated them in the form of two long connected narratives into St. Mark's framework. The reproduction was further modified in each case by the point of view and purpose of the writer ; and from the fact that the Logia were not written, but handed down orally, it will be understood that both evangelists exercised considerable freedom. Although, therefore there is a great deal of agreement between them, yet there are differences smaller and greater ; and, by comparing them

closely, it is possible to judge with a good deal of confidence in every case which reproduction is the more exact.

Wendt undertakes the task of reproducing the Logia word for word out of St. Matthew and St. Luke; and he prints the entire document in Greek, thus giving us what even the apostolic Church did not possess. It is a bold undertaking, and, however much we may differ from him, hearty gratitude is due to him for it. He thinks he is able in many cases to make one of the evangelists correct the other; sometimes both are wrong, but, having got the exact words and restored them to their right places, we can correct them both. He makes far too little allowance, however, for modifications in the sayings of Christ which may have been due to His making the same statements or using the same illustrations on different occasions. An itinerant preacher necessarily repeats himself; but, if he has any genius, he does not do so slavishly; he gives his illustrations different applications and points the same truths in different directions; and there is no irreverence in attributing to Jesus a thing so natural. Scholars constantly forget how brief the Gospels are, and how meagre are the fragments preserved to us of what our Lord must have done and said.

Although both the First and Third Gospels are thus mainly derived from St. Mark and the Logia combined, yet both writers have added a good deal derived from other sources, to us unknown. This is especially the case at the beginning and at the end. The narratives of the birth, infancy and youth of Jesus are found in the First and Third Gospels; but Wendt does not believe that they were in the Logia, and evidently he attaches to them little importance. The same is true of many details of the death and resurrection. On the resurrection the author expresses himself with extreme caution. All the length he is prepared to go may be gathered from these words: "That the disciples had the conviction

not only that they had seen the Risen Saviour, but that by means of these appearances they had obtained distinct knowledge of His Messianic person and their own apostolic vocation, appears to me, on account of the entirely analogous belief of St. Paul, to admit of no question."

To sum up, Wendt's aim, it will be seen, is to get behind the Gospels, which are secondary or sub-apostolic formations, to the apostolic materials out of which they were constructed with additions. St. Mark is nearest to an original document; but even it contains secondary additions, and its scheme of Christ's life is confused by the lack of literary skill. Out of St. Matthew and St. Luke another apostolic document can be reconstructed; but to the apostolic materials less trustworthy information has been added, and already the actual development of Christ's life has been forgotten. In St. John also we have an apostolic document of unique value, but it is hidden in another document, which breathes an entirely different spirit and has no sense whatever for the historicity of Christ's career. Among the secondary additions Wendt would reckon a great many of the outstanding miracles attributed to Christ—such as the Changing of Water into Wine, the Stilling of the Storm, St. Peter's Walking on the Sea, the Resurrection of the Daughter of Jairus, of the Widow's Son at Nain and of Lazarus, and, I suppose, also the bodily Resurrection of Christ Himself.

In the German preface to the second volume of his work Dr. Wendt complains of the slight attention bestowed on his first volume; but this misfortune has probably been a blessing in disguise; because, had the contents of the critical volume been well known in this country, the fact would probably have modified the welcome with which the translated volume has been received.

There are those, indeed, to whom such a presentation of the life of Christ may be a godsend. If a man has lost faith in the credibility of the Gospels and thus had his belief in the Son of God shattered altogether, the notion may be a highly welcome one that it is possible to get behind the actual Gospels and find a story, exiguous indeed and lacking in colour, yet apostolic and true; for this may seem to give him Jesus back again and to relight the lamp of religion. Accordingly, this critical procedure is lauded in certain quarters as being not the destruction but the restoration of belief. The meaning, however, of such a claim requires strict definition. To anyone who has a full-bodied faith in Christ and confidence in the Gospels such a scheme of the life of Christ as is supplied by Wendt is pure loss. To the common man it is disastrous in the highest degree, because it means that, when the Gospels are opened and the most affecting words of Christ read, there cannot be the slightest certainty whether or not these sayings actually emanated from Him or were secondary formations due to minds which only partially comprehended His spirit; this cannot be decided before the termination of a critical process, in which no two of the learned entirely agree. The question is not one of whether or not perfect accuracy is to be found in every detail of an incident, or whether the precise force of every saying of our Lord has been comprehended by the reporter: it is whether the greatest of the miracles attributed to Him were actually performed, and whether a considerable proportion of the words put into His mouth never came from His lips at all.

It may be that there lies before us a period in which the whole question will be thrashed out among ourselves on the lines on which it has been discussed in Germany. The impression, indeed, prevails in this country even among the educated that, the Tübingen theory being exploded, the

credibility of the Gospels has been settled forever. This, however, is an over-sanguine view, and does not at all correspond with the state of opinion abroad. Wendt, on the contrary, is a moderate representative of a large and extremely able set of German critics. The growing familiarity of the public mind in this country with the theories of Old Testament criticism may pave the way for a similar treatment of the Gospels; and the theories, backed by great accumulations of learning, are ready to the hand of anyone who may wish to distinguish himself by giving a shock to orthodoxy. The process, once begun, would not be easily brought to a termination; for there is no end to the combinations which are possible, when once it is taken for granted that the representations of the Gospels are not the actual facts, but creations of the imagination which have grown out of them.

Still there are aspects of Wendt's performance which are reassuring, even in view of such contingencies. Although to our insular notions his position appears extreme, he would be reckoned in the circle to which he belongs in a high degree conservative. He stands as the last term of a gigantic course of investigation, and, when his results are compared with the wilder ideas of the Tübingen school, the contrast is great. Even as they stand, the Gospels all belong, according to this author, to the first century, and in every one of them there is a large kernel proceeding directly from the apostolic circle. Wendt's detailed comparison, in his translated volume, of the teaching of Christ as reported by St. John with the same teaching as reported by the Synoptists, in order to prove their identity, is one of the most striking things in recent theology. The attempt to bring the Gospels far down and away from immediate connection with Christ has apparently failed. To use an illustration of Principal Rainy, the Gospel narrative, like a living creature, after being forcibly stretched away down

into the second century, has drawn itself together again right back into the heart of the first century. The question is thus very much narrowed. Was it possible in so short a time, within the memory of men who had lived with Christ, for the history to be so transformed? Could the course of Christ's career be so speedily forgotten? Could so many wonders, adorned with minute and lifelike details, be attributed to Him which He never performed?

It cannot be denied that there are some great difficulties in the Gospels, and we are indebted to Wendt for showing so clearly what these are. One thing, however, which makes one distrust his mode of approaching them is the stupidity which he is constantly attributing to the evangelists. They have misunderstood Christ, according to him, where His drift is perfectly obvious; they have overlooked the connection of this and that, when it might have been seen with half an eye. This reaches a height in the case of the fourth evangelist, who simply peppers the noble narrative of St. John with wrong-headed remarks and disquisitions. Leaving the reverence aside which may be due to holy men who spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, I am always suspicious of any theory which makes the writers of Scripture talk downright nonsense.

The truth is, Wendt's work is dominated from first to last by a theory. He makes no secret of it: on the contrary, he states it in the very first pages of the volume which I am reviewing, and he makes it the standard for judging every statement in the Gospels. This theory is, that the life of our Lord pursued the course, already described, which he finds indicated in St. Mark—although even St. Mark is not true to it, St. Matthew and St. Luke are unaware of it, and the Fourth Gospel clean contradicts it.

The outline of the life of Christ, which Wendt thus makes the standard for testing the evangelists, contains,

indeed, a great deal to which no objection need be taken ; but the denial that the Baptist acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah has very little to rest on. St. Mark, indeed, says that at His baptism Jesus saw the heavens rent asunder and the Spirit descending ; but he says not a word to indicate that He alone saw this vision and heard the voice which acknowledged Him as the Son of God. The whole scene has the appearance of being intended for others rather than for Him—the consciousness of Jesus did not require such external demonstrations to assist its operations.

But, asks Wendt, if the Baptist thus acknowledged the Messiahship of Jesus, and if other testimonies to it arose here and there from the first, what importance was there in the great confession of the Twelve through the lips of St. Peter ? This seems a formidable difficulty ; but, when this question is asked, are we not overlooking the religious character of the confession of the Twelve ? Their confession was not a dry inference from the observation of facts ; it was an outburst of religious conviction, and a solemn vow by which they were prepared to stand. And truth, when it is realised and acknowledged in this way, has all the force of novelty, although it may have been heard long before by the hearing of the ear.

I have never been able to feel any force in the assertion, which Wendt repeats, that, if at the baptism John had acknowledged the Messiahship of Jesus, he could not afterwards have sent his message from the prison. The most elementary acquaintance with the psychology of religion ought to enable us to understand how a man who was in the Baptist's circumstances and had passed through all that he had undergone might come to doubt what he had once firmly believed.

Christ's practice of requesting those whom He healed not to make Him known, and of enjoining His apostles not to reveal His Messiahship, is a perplexing trait ; but I

am not satisfied that Wendt's explanation is the correct one. St. Matthew quotes in explanation of it an ancient prophecy to the effect that the Messiah would not strive or cry or cause His voice to be heard in the streets; and this may be the true explanation—that it was due not to policy and deliberation, but to a subtle and delicate peculiarity of the temperament of Jesus. When it is recorded that Jesus enjoined one whom He had cured to tell no man, but that, in the ecstasy of restored health, the man blazed abroad the matter, are we quite certain that Jesus was displeased? We now read the statement with an amused gratification, and I am by no means certain that this was not the effect on Jesus likewise.

If Jesus had kept Himself as obscure as Wendt represents Him to have done and held back so long any hint of His Messiahship, it is a question how far the public and the authorities would have been responsible for at last refusing to acknowledge His claim.

But the final question is whether this figure presented by Wendt, and presented confidently by an increasing school in Germany, can be the veritable picture of Christ—the figure of One who had no pre-existence, but was the son of Joseph and Mary; who knew some secrets of the medical art and by means of these healed the sick, but did not raise Jairus' daughter, or the widow's son, or the brother of the sisters of Bethany; who taught the words of eternal life, but was not Himself rescued from the power of the grave? Is this the authentic portrait of Jesus Christ? It is totally unlike the image presented by the Gospel of St. Mark as a whole. But, even if St. Mark did offer it—or any skilfully excerpted section of St. Mark—would it be credible? In my opinion it would be utterly incredible. We do not know for certain the dates of the Gospels; but we do know, almost to a year, the dates of the great, universally recognised epistles of St. Paul. This apostle was of almost the

same age as Jesus, and he was at the full height of his powers when he applied his mind to the scrutiny of the life of Christ. Now, what is the image of Christ presented in St. Paul's writings? Christ is the Judge of men, and, therefore, He must have a supernatural knowledge of their hearts; He is the Saviour of the world, on whom the burdened conscience can lay the whole weight of its sin and the immortal spirit the whole weight of its destiny; He was before all things, and He now lives as the ascended Lord at the right hand of God; His name is above every name, and to Him every knee shall bow. This was not the faith of St. Paul alone: it was notoriously the faith of the whole Church within a single generation of Christ's death; for on this subject there was no difference of opinion among the first witnesses of Christianity. Now, is there any resemblance between this image and that which Wendt proposes to put in its place? It is true that, with the great exception of the resurrection, St. Paul does not mention the miracles of our Lord; but the entire image of the Saviour presented in the Pauline writings—and the same is true of all the writings of the New Testament—is congruent and harmonious with a birth, a life and a death such as the actual Gospels depict, and it is utterly incongruous with such a history as Wendt puts together from the gospel within the Gospels. If Christianity from the very start was founded on a huge falsification, to however innocent causes the distortion of facts may have been due, it is vain at this time of day to attempt to begin it over again. Besides, if Christ was not the glorious Son of God whom the evangelists and apostles represented Him to be, but only this figure to which those who agree with Wendt would reduce Him, then it is far more evident that it is hopeless to reintegrate the Christian religion upon these terms; for this is not the kind of Saviour that the world requires.

JAMES STALKER.