

The *Proslogion*, Gilbert Crispin, and the *Cur Deus homo*: Anselm's Student and the Problems of the Incarnation

The connection between Gilbert Crispin's *Dispute between a Jew and a Christian* and Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* is paradoxically well established and yet underexplored. As early as 1954, Richard Southern noted some links between the two texts and hypothesized that Anselm had some influence on Gilbert's argument.¹ Gilbert's *Dispute* has sometimes been used to help explain the role of Anselm's unnamed Jewish interlocutors in the *Cur Deus Homo*, though more often Anselm's Jews are considered to be fictive and not indicative of any real interaction between Anselm and Jews.² When the connection between texts are investigated, the main points of connection are seen in the occurrence of a Jewish objection against the Incarnation using the language of the *Proslogion*, in a discussion of the devil's rights, and in Gilbert's use of an argument against the possibility of an angel or human restoring human nature. My argument will acknowledge these elements, though I will take issue with Richard Southern's interpretation of them, and go further, showing that the *Cur Deus Homo* is an apologetic for Anselm's *Proslogion*, that the questions raised in Gilbert's *Dispute* also contribute to Anselm's discussions in the *Cur Deus Homo* of the virgin birth and several other topics. Additionally, I will argue that Anselm's tactic of removing Christ from the discussion is a tactic developed in response to the failure of Gilbert's attempt to offer a convincing argument for the Incarnation using the Old Testament.

For the benefit of those who have not read it, let me provide a brief overview of Gilbert's *Dispute*. Gilbert Crispin, one of Anselm's former students, was brought to England from Normandy by Lanfranc in 1085, where he became the abbot at Westminster. The Norman kings, in addition to importing a great number of Bec alumni for the purpose of reinvigorating the English monasteries,³ also imported a contingent of Jews from Normandy to take care of some of their financial matters⁴ – even back then war required the ability to acquire debt and Jews could charge interest to non-Jews.⁵ Gilbert apparently did business with one of these Jews, who Gilbert reports was educated in Mainz, and occasionally they engaged in a friendly theological discussion, which served as the genesis of Gilbert's written dispute.⁶ While there is some dispute over the reality of Gilbert's interlocutor, the majority of scholars think that the *Dispute* is the fruit of a genuine discussion, though one that Gilbert reworked and edited. We see elements of this reality when the Jewish speaker complains about Christian treatment of Jews at the beginning of the dialogue, wondering why if "the Law must be observed, why do you compare its followers to

¹ Richard W. Southern, "St. Anselm and Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster," *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 3 (1954): 78–115.

² Eileen Carroll Sweeney, *Anselm of Canterbury and the Desire for the Word* (Washington (D.C.): The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 278.

³ Sally N. Vaughn, "The Students of Bec in England," in *Saint Anselm of Canterbury and His Legacy*, ed. Giles E. M. Gasper and Ian Logan (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2012), 80.

⁴ Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christian Jewish Relations 1000-1300: Jews in the Service of Medieval Christendom* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 88–9.

⁵ Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 2014), 67–8.

⁶ Gilbert Crispin, *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster* (London: Published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press, 1986), sec. 3–4. An English translation can be found in Gilbert Crispin, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: The Example of Gilbert Crispin*, ed. and trans. Ole J. Thienhaus (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2006).

dogs, as people to be chased away with clubs, and why do you attack us on every occasion?"⁷ and in his objection to an interpretation of Baruch where he demands the Christian to "drop your animosity toward us, be ashamed of the falsehoods you invented against us, and acknowledge that the foremost truth in the Law and the Prophets remains with us."⁸ Behind Gilbert's editing and revisions, we see a real person making an objection that would normally be airbrushed out by someone inventing a discussion whole cloth.

We also know that Anselm was with Gilbert in somewhere around the fall of 1092 and it appears that he planned to spend enough time at Westminster to send one of Gilbert's monks back to Bec to pick up some of his prayers and his initial draft of the *Letter on the Incarnation of the Word*.⁹ Richard Southern has neatly laid out the probable chain of events that led to Anselm's familiarity with Gilbert's discussion.¹⁰ And, of course, once Gilbert completes his text, he sends it to Anselm and requests his feedback.¹¹

The *Dispute* itself is structured around a series of seven questions, with the Jew presenting a series of objections and the Christian offering a response. The first series of questions revolves around why Christians do not follow all of the Mosaic law, the second discusses whether or not the Messiah has come, the third (and the one that most scholars focus upon) is about the problems of the Incarnation with respect to God, as well as the Virgin birth and original sin. The fourth follows the third by discussing how it would be possible for one of Abraham's descendants to be born without semen, the fifth deals with questions of the selection, use, and interpretation of Old Testament texts by Christians, the sixth section continues the debate about allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, and the seventh and final section deals with Jewish complaints about Christian idolatry found in worshipping images.

With that overview in place, I want to draw attention first to links between the *Proslogion* and Gilbert's *Dispute*, with the goal of showing that questions raised in the *Proslogion* reappear in the *Dispute* or that the *Dispute* assumes the truth of those attributes. We see for instance, the Jew objecting that the Incarnation would introduce change into God, who is immutable, a topic that Anselm covers in *Proslogion* 22 and that Gilbert introduces in section 73.¹² Immediately afterward the Jew raises the objection, using language from the *Proslogion* that:

"if God is unending, how could he be circumscribed in the puny little measure of human limbs? If God is unlimited, by what kind of argument can it be said that, limited in his corporeal dimensions, he could be totally held enclosed in one maternal womb? Furthermore, if God is that which nothing greater and more sufficient can be thought, by what *necessity* was he forced into participating in human misery and made sharer and sufferer in such great tribulations? Finally, if God became man, how will stand what He Himself says to Moses: 'For man may not see me and live?' there seems to be a contradiction that God became man and

⁷ Gilbert Crispin, *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster*, sec. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 120.

⁹ Anselm, *The Letters of Saint Anselm of Canterbury* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1990), vol. 2, Letter 147.

¹⁰ Southern, "St. Anselm and Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster."

¹¹ Gilbert Crispin, *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster*, sec. 1–10.

¹² Anselm, "Proslogion," in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), sec. 22. Note that Gilbert introduces the question of immutability before the Jew raises it as an objection.

could not be seen by man or even his very mother. For it may be discounted, as you assert, that about God there should have been anything absurd."¹³

Additionally, Gilbert relies on the omnipresence of God in chapter 109, a topic of *Proslogion* 13 and also spends time rehearsing the question of the relationship of God's justice and mercy in chapters 136-7, another interest of Anselm from *Proslogion* 9-11.

Now overall it would be fair to argue that the primary emphasis of Gilbert's dispute is over interpretation of the Old Testament.¹⁴ The two disputants agree at the very beginning to restrict themselves to reason and scripture, here understood as the Old Testament. But we also can see that what makes this dispute possible is a shared understanding of God between Gilbert and his interlocutor. Part of this shared understanding, as I have just shown, is rooted in aspects of Anselm's argument in the *Proslogion*. Another way of putting this is that if Anselm's concept of God from the *Proslogion* is true, then the Incarnation presents a very difficult problem for Christians and for Anselm. If God is immutable, then it would appear that the Incarnation introduces change into God. If God cannot suffer, then how does one make sense of the suffering of the cross? If God is wise, then why would he seem to do something that even Paul considers foolishness?¹⁵ If God is merciful, then why not just forgive humans rather than go through the complexity of the Incarnation? Upon reading the final version of Gilbert's *Dispute*, Anselm must have realized that he once again needed to make a defense of the *Proslogion*, this time not in response to a Christian, but to a fellow monotheist.

Gilbert finished the text no later than 1093, since the first version of the text we have addresses Anselm as abbot, and Anselm won't begin to work on the *Cur Deus Homo* until 1095. Gilbert sends the work to Anselm asking him for his approval or any correction. Anselm never replies affirmatively or negatively.

In the article I have already mentioned, Richard Southern created a narrative of these events that has stood for sixty years, but it is a story with several serious flaws. Southern points out several of the similarities between Gilbert's *Dispute* and the *Cur Deus Homo*. In particular, Southern draws attention to the existence in Gilbert of Anselm's concept of God from the *Proslogion*, Gilbert's argument rejecting the salvation of humans by other humans or angels, and the argument about the devil's rights. In the case of the use of the *Proslogion*, Southern argues that it represents an interpolation based on discussions Anselm and Gilbert had in the fall/winter of 1092-3.¹⁶ With regard to the rejection of the idea that humans could be saved by another human or angel, Southern argues that the idea must have originated with Anselm and that Gilbert borrowed it in advance of Anselm including it in the *Cur Deus Homo*. And in Southern's understanding, Gilbert's affirmation of the devil's rights represents an early idea of Anselm's, not Gilbert's, that Anselm then reworks in the *Cur Deus Homo*. So even though both topics are treated by Gilbert and then later by Anselm, Southern conjectures that their existence in Gilbert is solely the responsibility of Anselm.

¹³ Gilbert Crispin, *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster*, sec. 81. Note that Gilbert goads the question in section 74, when he asserts: "'Because he is God, he could not die or suffer or be born; because he is man, he could be born and suffer and die, and he chose to, and through the mystery of his passion he redeemed us from death.'

¹⁴ Anna Sapir Abulafia, "Gilbert Crispin's Disputations: An Exercise in Hermeneutics," in *Mutations Socio-Culturelles Au Tournant Des XIe-XIIe Siècles* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1984), 511-20.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:18.

¹⁶ Southern, "St. Anselm and Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster," 92.

Southern makes this rather strange argument based on an unwillingness to concede any possibility that Gilbert was an original or philosophical thinker, suggesting that it is unbelievable that Anselm “borrowed a central point in his doctrine of the Redemption from Gilbert Crispin.”¹⁷ Southern says that Gilbert was more inclined to exegetical work than speculative work, so that Gilbert was up to questions of interpretation, and by implication not up to the kind of work that Anselm would later do.¹⁸ Anselm, Southern argues, had “intellectual resources [that] were incomparably richer than those of Gilbert.”¹⁹ Because Southern believes this, he has to make an argument that anything that is interesting or innovative in Gilbert’s work that later shows up in Anselm’s work is in fact Anselm’s idea to begin with. His argument is unsatisfactory.

First, Southern offers up his argument based on his assessment of Gilbert’s works, but pays little attention to their genre, context, or audiences, or even to the fact that Gilbert wasn’t a teacher like Anselm was. So he concludes that Gilbert just wasn’t capable of innovative theological argumentation. But the context of this dispute isn’t philosophical, but exegetical, so it did not require philosophy. Second, as Southern does point out, in one of his letters Anselm actually does use some of Gilbert’s work with regard to monasticism, so Anselm wasn’t adverse to using Gilbert’s ideas when they were salutary.²⁰ Third, the question of the devil’s rights as Gilbert applies it wasn’t new or innovative, but rather part of their Augustinian inheritance from *De Trinitate*. In attempt to further burnish Anselm’s reputation, Southern makes a strange argument that is overly complex. And speaking on behalf of all students of especially brilliant dissertation advisors, it is entirely possible for a student to occasionally have a bright idea that their teacher had not considered.

Instead, a better explanation would run as follows. Gilbert and Anselm talked about this issue during Anselm’s visit with Gilbert, but the work was Gilbert’s. Upon receiving the final version of Gilbert’s *Dispute*, Anselm realized what a severe challenge to his concept of God had been leveled by the Jew and so took up this topic – this is the origin of his unbelievers in the *Cur Deus Homo*, not direct, but second hand, but real nonetheless. He adopts some of Gilbert’s ideas and amends others. Rather than having to deny the intellectual abilities of Gilbert and posit a supposed influence of Anselm at some points and not at others, a more parsimonious explanation is simply that Anselm was already aware of the argument, read the work, and decided he could do better, especially since he realized that the argument could only be decided on reason alone, not with any Christological interpretation of the Old Testament. In fact, at the very beginning of the *Cur Deus Homo* Anselm mentions that he has had many requests for him to put in writing the reasons he gives for the Incarnation, including requests by letter.²¹ One way of reading Gilbert’s letter at the beginning of the *Dispute* is that he is one such person giving such a request.

In fact, in addition to defending his concept of God from the *Proslogion*, Anselm takes up several issues in the *Cur Deus Homo* that show up in Gilbert’s *Dispute*. Some he adopts wholesale and some he seems to engage quite differently. He will take up the question of the necessity of the Incarnation, questions about the Virgin conception, the Devil’s rights with regard to humans, and the inability of humans or angels to save humans from damnation. But

¹⁷ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹⁹ Ibid., 93.

²⁰ Ibid., 90.

²¹ Anselm, “Cur Deus Homo,” in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), bk. I.1.

there is also one other topic of the *Dispute* that Anselm takes up indirectly, which is about how to deal with disputes over scripture.

As I mentioned, the majority of the debate in the *Dispute* has to do with the interpretation of the Old Testament and my hypothesis is that Gilbert's lack of success in convincing this Jew is the genesis of Anselm's *remoto Christo* move in the *Cur Deus Homo*. Fundamental to the hermeneutical dispute is a question over the literal interpretation of the Old Testament versus the metaphorical interpretation, with the Jew arguing for the primacy of a literal interpretation and the Christian for the primacy of the metaphorical interpretation.²² The Christian points out that many of God's commands from the Old Testament appear to be inconsistent or in conflict with one another, and since he presumes that God is incapable of behaving inconsistently, he argues that some of the rules, such as the prohibition against pork, must have a metaphorical intent that points to Christ, so that the rule is no longer applicable once Christ comes to fulfill the law.²³ It is a classic case of a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament, and it is completely unacceptable to the Jew because it begs the very question that is in dispute, about the Incarnation.²⁴ How can you prove the existence of Christ by assuming a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament? Anselm must have noticed the intractability of the problem and realized that he had to remove Christ from his argument in order not to beg the question. But note that what he does not remove from his argument is scripture as he does in the *Monologion*, but rather scriptural references to Christ in the Old and New Testament. Anselm relies on a whole host of Old Testament ideas, most importantly those of creation and Fall, but not a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament.

As we've already discussed, the Jewish use of Anselm's formula from the *Proslogion* is one of the key challenges to Anselm. How could "that which a greater cannot be thought" change and undergo suffering? In the *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm and Boso repeat this objection twice in the opening three chapters, in the opening section, where Anselm says that "unbelievers commonly raise as an objection against us, deriding our simplicity as foolishness...[that] God did become a human being and...restore life to the world by own death,"²⁵ and section 3, where Boso fleshes out the objection of the unbelievers "who deride our simplicity [and] object that we injure and insult God when we say that he descended into a woman's womb, was born of a woman, grew by being nourished by milk and human foods, and...suffered fatigue, hunger, thirst, beatings, and crucifixion and death between thieves."²⁶ This second quote has enough similarity with the Jewish objection from Gilbert's *Dispute* that one would be hard pressed to think there isn't a direct influence. But the influence of the formulation of the *Proslogion* extends beyond those two examples, for there are echoes of the *Proslogion* throughout the *Cur Deus Homo*, so that Anselm is trying to show that the Incarnation is the paradigm case of how God is exactly "that which none greater can be conceived." Sometimes this is done in a negative way, when sin against God is declared to be "something than which nothing is less tolerable"²⁷ or the intentional death of God is declared an "infinite sin to which no other sins can be compared."²⁸ In a positive vein, Anselm concludes his argument with a declaration that God's mercy is "so great and so

²² Gilbert Crispin, *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster*, sec. 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, sec. 47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 37.

²⁵ Anselm, "Cur Deus Homo," bk. I.1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, bk. I.3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, bk. I.13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, bk. II.15.

consonant with justice that it cannot be thought to be greater or more just."²⁹ The *Cur Deus Homo* begins with an objection to his concept of God, dwells on the inconceivability of the sin against God, and concludes with Anselm declaring that the Incarnation shows that God's mercy and justice are greater than we can conceive. We even have a kind of reappearance of the fool from the *Proslogion*, when Anselm suggests that those who object to his argument are fools.³⁰ Here we have a robust defense of the *Proslogion* against the objections registered by the Jew in Gilbert's *Dispute*.

A second place that Anselm builds upon and responds to Gilbert's *Dispute* is on the question of the necessity of the Incarnation. It appears from Gilbert's *Dispute* that the Jew introduces this question, and Gilbert responds with the assertion that "the highest *necessity* of reason demanded that God should become man and restore us through the mystery of his incarnation to life," but Anselm takes it up and makes a great effort to show that there is in fact no necessity in God, but only in us, that we need God in order to be saved. The necessity with regard to God is only subsequent necessity that follows from what God has willed. Let me also say that I am not convinced that this question is philosophical in origin, but rather has a biblical basis in Jesus' explanation of the Incarnation during the experience on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus says "Was it not *necessary* that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory? Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures."³¹ The question of necessity is rooted not only in Gilbert's *Dispute*, and perhaps as some have suggested the school at Laon, but is made licit by Jesus' declaration that his own suffering was necessary; Anselm was just seeking to understand what was given to him by faith in the scriptures.

With regard to the rights of devil, Anselm famously departs from the Augustinian tradition. While Gilbert says that humans do owe something to the devil, so that the devil has rights over us, Anselm, through Boso, rejects this position. The devil's rights had a strong patristic history and Anselm would have been most familiar with the arguments made by Augustine in *De Trinitate* books four and thirteen. Southern, as I have mentioned, postulated that Anselm interpolated an affirmation of the devil's rights in Gilbert's *Disputes*³² and then changed his mind later,³³ where a better explanation would be that Gilbert just adopted the Augustinian position, with which he would have been familiar. But why does Anselm, through Boso, reject this standard position, which he quite overtly acknowledges is the customary explanation?³⁴ It appears that once again he is concerned to protect his concept of God. He rejects the position because it suggests that God lacks power and justice. With another echo of the *Proslogion*, Boso argues that God is freely able to save someone who has become unjustly enslaved to another and that if God were to rescue humans, "what could be done more justly?"³⁵ Anselm wants to be clear that nothing has power over God or God's creation and so God is free to deal with creatures in a way that is fitting with his own nature. With regard to the Incarnation, Anselm seems to be closing off as many objections to his concept of God as possible, even at the cost of rejecting a centuries old explanation.

²⁹ Ibid., bk. II.20.

³⁰ Ibid., bk. I.25.

³¹ Luke 24:26, where 'necessity' is translated from *e"dei*. The Vulgate translates this as *oportuit*, which may not have quite the same philosophical import as *necessitas*, but is certainly sufficient to raise the question.

³² Gilbert Crispin, *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster*, sec. 102–3.

³³ Southern, "St. Anselm and Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster," 93.

³⁴ Anselm, "Cur Deus Homo," bk. I.7.

³⁵ Ibid.

Anselm also takes up other topics from Gilbert that we have not yet discussed, most prominently that of the virgin birth. In Gilbert's *Dispute* the Jew objects to the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 as the basis of the Christian idea that "that which none greater can be conceived" could be enclosed in a womb.³⁶ It is absurd enough to suggest that God could become man, but for the Jew it hermeneutically suspect to use Isaiah 7:14 as the basis of the Christian position. In response, Gilbert uses allegorical interpretations of Ezekiel 44:2-3 and two Psalms to argue for the virgin conception and even reintroduces the idea of necessity, saying "the highest necessity of reason demanded that God should become man and restore us through the mystery of his incarnation to life."³⁷ In response the Jew absolutely ridicules the Christian and accuses him of twisting scripture to support his faith. He even asks a follow up question about how Christ could be one of Abraham's descendants and yet be born without semen,³⁸ a question that Anselm dwells on in *On the Virgin Conception*.³⁹

Anselm addresses the issue of the Virgin birth in depth in two places. In the *Cur Deus Homo* he takes up the question in II.8 and II.16, but even more importantly, he takes up the question more substantially in his self-declared sequel to the *Cur Deus Homo*, in *On the Virgin Conception, and On Original Sin*. The problem that he is solving in the *Virgin Conception* is rooted in the Jewish objections found in Gilbert's *Dispute*, but Anselm attempts to solve the problem without recourse to the text from Isaiah.

To summarize, my argument has tied together four texts, beginning with the *Proslogion*, through Gilbert's *Dispute*, into the *Cur Deus Homo* and the *Virgin Conception*, with Gilbert's *Dispute* being the key pivot point that links Anselm's earlier and later works. While contemporary philosophers have focused their work on the *Proslogion* and contemporary theologians have tended to focus on the *Cur Deus Homo*, the questions raised in Gilbert's *Dispute* help us see the close connection to the two works, so that the *Cur Deus Homo* is best understood as an apologetic work in defense of the *Proslogion*. Additionally, the removal of Christ from the discussion is introduced by Anselm because the insoluble hermeneutical questions of Gilbert's *Dispute* won't allow for a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament, which would beg the question for the necessity of the Incarnation. So while scholars have mentioned the appearance of some Anselmian ideas in Gilbert's *Dispute*, the move by Southern to minimize Gilbert's role and maximize Anselm's have led us to neglect the importance of the questions raised in Gilbert's *Dispute*, questions which I hope I have shown forced Anselm to write not one, but two major works defending the Christian concept of God and the Incarnation.

³⁶ Gilbert Crispin, *The Works of Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster*, sec. 81–2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, sec. 90.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 106–7.

³⁹ Anselm, "On the Virgin Conception, and on Original Sin," in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), sec. 11–18.