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Expository Preaching with Biblical Contexts on the Horizon: Hebrews as a Sermonic Model

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Abstract: *The rationale for and benefits of expository preaching have been well-established in the field of homiletics. If a fair critique exists for this philosophy of preaching, however, it is that it is often seen as less applicable to the lives of the audience and therefore less effective in producing life change. One reason may be the hesitancy of practitioners to employ contextualization in their preaching. Perhaps the hesitancy lies in the concern that to do so could corrupt the meaning and intent of the pericope in the sermon. In this article, the author addresses this perceived and potential deficiency by arguing for the use of multiple levels of contextualization in expository preaching. In order to do so, four aspects of contextualization will be identified. Then, by using these aspects as a guide, the book of Hebrews, which has been recognized by contemporary scholarship as being sermonic, will be analyzed to offer both a biblical precedent for and model of a four-fold aspect of contextualization in expository preaching. Finally, five implications for contemporary preaching will be offered.*

Key Words: *audience analysis, contextualization, expository preaching, Hebrews, homiletics, preaching, text-driven preaching.*

The foundations of and the rationale for expository preaching have been well established in the field of homiletics. Furthermore, lists of benefits for this approach in contemporary preaching manuals certainly are easily found. In the following excerpt from their 2018 publication, *Preaching for the Rest of Us*, Gallaty and Smith may offer the most thorough, yet concise, summary.

> There is no shortage of good arguments for preaching in an expository, text-driven way. Perhaps the most significant argument stems from the nature of the Word itself. If we believe Scripture contains the very words of God and that both God and what He speaks are perfect, then anything we do that hinders our presenting Scripture is a tragedy. While the nature of the Word is the primary factor that compels expositional preaching, the nature of the preacher's call and the nature of the church also lend support to this methodology. These three arguments for text-driven preaching may be summarized as follows:
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> 1. The Nature of the Word: We are called to preach Christ, and Christ is revealed in the Word.
> 2. The Nature of the Call: Preaching the text is working out our own call to ministry by crucifying our personal agendas so others might live, and thus living according to Christ's example.
> 3. The Nature of the Church: The Word of God sanctifies the church.[1]

However, perhaps if a "fair" critique of expository preaching does exist, then it is a longstanding one. This critique has been stated in a myriad of ways such as "it is boring," "it is not engaging," or "it is ineffective." However, the sentiment is always the same. This type of preaching does not give the preacher's audience, the contemporary hearer, a significant enough "seat at the table" in the sermon. Andy Stanley codified this position and expressed his frustration toward expository preaching in his book *Communicating for a Change*. In the context of describing the three approaches to preaching (*teach the Bible to people*, *teach people the Bible*, and *teach people how to live a life that reflects the values, principles, and truths of the Bible*) and identifying the one that is most effective, he seemed to place expository preaching in the "least concerned about engaging the audience and most ineffective" category.

> The idea here is to teach the content of the Bible so that interested parties can understand and navigate their way through the Scriptures.
>
> This is usually the goal of a preacher or teacher who methodically and systematically teachers verse by verse through books of the Bible. This is the perfect approach for the communicator whose goal is to simply explain what the Bible means. Wherever we left off last week, we will pick up again next week. This ap-

[1] Robby Gallaty and Steven Smith, *Preaching for the Rest of Us: Essentials for Text-Driven Preaching* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2018), 7. See also Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2017), 23–93 and Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Mathews, eds., *Text-Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 1–8.

> proach requires no creativity. This approach need not include any application. This approach assumes a great deal of interest by the audience. And honestly, this approach is easy when compared to other methods of communication.[2]

Stanley concluded by being even more direct: "Every communicator I know wants to see lives changed as a result of their preaching and teaching…. Preaching for life change requires far less information and more application. Less explanation and more inspiration. Less first century and more twenty-first century."[3]

Although he misses the proverbial bullseye, perhaps he has struck a target. In other words, even though Stanley's characterization of expository preaching and *all* expositors is deficient, he does seem to have identified a deficiency in the typical approach. For what is the essence of this position? Is it not true that a pastor who is committed to exposition can be in danger of being so focused on the "then" of the text that he gives little attention to the "now" of his audience? And by this reference, we ignore the real audience in front of the preacher: their background, hurts, struggles, experiences, needs, and brokenness. Of all types of preachers, we may indeed be the ones who are in the most danger of forgetting that we are not simply preaching sermons but that we are preaching sermons to people!

The authors of several homiletics textbooks, many of which advocate for expository preaching, have included the role of the audience in the sermonic process. A classic example is John Stott's seminal work on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*. In describing the task, and perhaps the difficulty of the job of the faithful expositor, he used the metaphor of "bridge-building" to describe preaching. The simple, yet profound, idea is that the effective preacher must have one foot firmly planted in the world of the text and his other foot securely immersed in the world of the day.

> It is because preaching is not exposition only but communication, not just the exegesis of a text but the conveying of a God-given message to living people who need to hear it, that I am going to develop a different metaphor to illustrate the essential nature of preaching. It is non-biblical in the sense that it is not explicitly used in Scripture, but I hope to show that what it lays upon us is a fundamentally biblical task. The metaphor is that of bridge-building.
>
> Now a bridge is a means of communication between two places which would otherwise be cut off from one another by a river or a ravine. It makes possible a flow of traffic which without it would be impossible. What, then, does the gorge or chasm represent? And what is the bridge which spans it? The chasm is the deep rift between the biblical world and the modern world.[4]

But, is even this level of contextualization really all there is to contemporary expository preaching? Perhaps a more foundational question is: can a sermon be true to the text and simultaneously truly effective for a twenty-first century audience? And if so, is this all that should be considered for contextualization in preaching: the historical text and the contemporary audience? Biblically, what should be included when we discuss context for a sermon? Furthermore, is there a biblical precedent for and a model to follow when doing so?

In this essay, I will attempt to provide answers to these questions and in so doing offer an approach to contextualization in preaching with a clear biblical foundation. In order to do so, four aspects of contextualization, which are present in contemporary preaching literature, will be identified and described briefly. Then, by using basic descriptions of each of these aspects as a guide, the book of Hebrews, and specifically its use of the Melchizedekian priesthood motif from Genesis 14 and its application to Christ, will be analyzed in order to offer both a biblical precedent for and model of a four-fold aspect of contextualization in expository preaching. Finally, implications for preaching today will be set forth.

The Four Considerations for Contextualization

In this section, the four-fold aspect of contextualization will be briefly identified and described.

The Historical Context

First, the historical context is situated in the interpretation of the pericope in its immediate textual milieu. Such concepts as purpose and occasion and meaning as related to the original author and his primary

[2] Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 93–94.

[3] Stanley and Jones, *Communicating for a Change*, 96.

[4] John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 137–38.

audience, or authorial intent, are essential in determining this aspect. Carter, Duvall, and Hays illustrate this concept in preaching by comparing and contrasting the "their town" and "our town" of the sermon. For them, "their town" functionally describes the process of determining the historical aspect of sermon preparation. "We are referring here to 'their town' information, which includes context, history, and culture of the time…. We call it 'their town' information because the original audience would have known or quickly perceived this pertinent material as they received the message."[5] This context is essentially what the text meant "then" and is foundational for any approach to exposition. They explain, "Good biblical preaching occurs only when you personally grasp the full meaning of God's Word."[6] Many texts on expository preaching include this aspect as the beginning step for sermon composition. This practice of locating the historical context may involve such components as historical and cultural analysis, literary analysis, and grammatical and syntactical analysis.[7]

The Canonical Context

Second is what may be called the canonical context. This aspect may be encapsulated in the concepts of Biblical Theology or Exegetical Theology. The main point in discerning canonical context is to consider a context that extends beyond the immediate passage being investigated. As Greidanus notes, "Theological interpretation raises such questions as, Why was this text preserved in the canon? What does God reveal in this text about himself and his will? And what does this message mean in the context of the whole Bible?"[8] Stated simply, this aspect may ask how the truth or theology of the pericope connects to the larger re-

[5] Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 72–73.

[6] Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word*, 73.

[7] See Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word*, 74–83; David Alan Black, "Exegesis for the Text-Driven Sermon," in *Text-Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon,* ed. Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Mathews (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 138–52; and Robinson's definition of expository preaching in Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 21.

[8] Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 102.

demptive story of God in his Word. Goldsworthy adds,

> From the evangelical preacher's point of view, biblical theology involves the quest for the big picture, or the overview, of biblical revelation. It is the nature of biblical revelation that it tells a story rather than sets out timeless principles in abstract. It does contain many timeless principles, but not in abstract. They are given in a historical context of progressive revelation. If we allow the Bible to tell its own story, we find a coherent and meaningful whole. To understand this meaningful whole we have to allow the Bible to stand as it is: a remarkable complexity yet a brilliant unity, which tells the story of the creation and saving plan of God.[9]

A key component of canonical context is intertextuality. Hays comments, "The phenomenon of intertextuality—the imbedding of fragments of an earlier text within a later one—has always played a major role in the cultural traditions that are heir to Israel's Scriptures: the voice of Scripture, regarded as authoritative in one way or another, continues to speak in and through later texts that both depend on and transform the earlier."[10] In the search for the "imbedded fragments," the preacher may find direct quotes, obvious allusions, or more faint echoes of the earlier text.[11] However, in preaching, we are not limiting ourselves to the New Testament's use of the Old when searching for the canonical context. Hays continues, "Such intertextual processes do not begin only with the formal closure of the canon."[12] Thus, even Old Testament texts may depend on or transform earlier Old Testament pericopes for the communication or teaching of God's revelation. This concept is important for determining canonical context.

Although today, several hermeneutics and homiletics texts include a section on canonical context, or at least show evidence of applying the concept to the discipline of preaching, it may have been Walter Kaiser who codified it as a methodology for effectively preaching the Old Testament.

There is one place where canonical concerns must be introduced,

[9] Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 22.

[10] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 14.

[11] Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 29–33.

[12] Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 14.

> however. *After* we have finished our exegetical work of establishing what, indeed, the author of the paragraph or text under consideration was trying to say, *then* we must go on to set this teaching in its total Biblical context by way of gathering together what God has continued to say on the topic. We should then compare this material with our findings concerning the passage being investigated. But mind this point well: canonical context must appear only as part of our summation and not as part of our exegesis.[13]

In practice, then, canonical context is the process of looking for how meaning or the truth(s) located in the immediate historical context of a passage is projected through the rest of the canon or perhaps even finds its terminus in another location in Scripture. "Preaching," states Goldsworthy, "to be true to God's plan and purpose, should constantly call people back to this perspective. If God has given us a single picture of reality, albeit full of texture and variety, a picture spanning the ages, then our preaching must reflect the reality that is thus presented."[14]

The Contemporary Context

Third, the contemporary context is situated in the significance of the pericope for the preacher's current and contemporary audience. Again, Carter, Duvall, and Hays's comparison and contrast of the "their town" and "our town" of the sermon helps with the understanding of this concept in preaching. For them, "our town" functionally describes the process of communicating to the contemporary context in the sermon. They write, "Crossing the bridge poses the greatest challenge to the interpreter but also promises the greatest reward, because here we cross from the ancient world to our world. The theological principle reflected in the meaning of the text allows us to cross from the biblical world to our world. Remember, this theological principle is tied to *meaning*."[15] This context is essentially why the text matters, or the "so what," to your specific audience and is essential for any effective sermon. Again, Carter, Duval, and Hays explain, "The burden of communication in the preaching event lies with you, the preacher…. The burden is on you to organize it in a way they can follow, say it in terms they understand, and

[13] Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 83.

[14] Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, 22.

[15] Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word*, 61.

illustrate it, when needed, for maximum listener comprehension."[16] Many texts on expository preaching will include this aspect as a beginning step for sermon composition. Contemporary context is often grasped through what is referred to as audience analysis or audience exegesis.[17] Knowing the contemporary context should impact almost every aspect of the sermon including illustrations, application, and the preacher's style.[18] Ultimately, the contemporary context in the sermon must concern itself at all cost with the *real* audience in front of the preacher—their background, hurts, struggles, experiences, needs, and brokenness—and lead to a type of preaching in which these are addressed.

The Eschatological Context

The final context is what may be called the eschatological context. This aspect refers to how the theology or biblical truth(s) of the pericope under investigation connects to the "so what" in a consummatory way thus providing ultimate hope applied to the circumstance of the audience. This hope is futuristic and transcends the current place and time of the physical world by finding its foundation in the reigning King and his kingdom. The goal of the eschatological context is to find and reveal how the meaning of the text legitimately connects to the ultimate hope and provide grounds for why this hope should be relied upon.

Admittedly, this context may be the most difficult to define and specifically locate in texts on homiletic theory and practice. Nonetheless, conceptually this aspect is both present and modeled in sermonic material in the Bible itself. Consider Jesus's approach in what is known as "The Beatitudes" in the Sermon on the Mount:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness,

[16] Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word*, 100.

[17] See Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word*, 85–98; and Wayne V. McDill, *The Moment of Truth: A Guide to Effective Sermon Delivery* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 1999), 39–55.

[18] See Vines and Shaddix, *Power in Pulpit,* 262–82.

> for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt 5:3–12)[19]

Contextually, his entire message may have been situated in the fact that even though the kingdom is not completely here, it is here because the King has arrived. Therefore, how to live as kingdom citizens now in light of that reality and the hope it brings must be grasped. Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:19–21). Later, Jesus continued with a similar thought: "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt 6:33).

Even though this aspect of context is not directly locatable in most homiletics textbooks, Goldsworthy may have approached the idea conceptually:

> No New Testament document makes sense apart from the central affirmation that Jesus Christ has come among us as the bringer of salvation. Though a composite of twenty-seven distinct documents, the New Testament is unified as a book about Jesus who is the Savior who came to live, die, rise again; who comes among his people now through his word and Spirit; and who will come again in great glory to judge the living and the dead.... The soundest methodological starting point is the gospel since the person of Jesus is proclaimed as the final and fullest expression of God's revelation of his kingdom.[20]

The eschatological context, then, may be understood in how the text under investigation projects toward the ultimate hope that we have in Christ, how we are called to worship the returning King, and how we should live now as citizens of his kingdom; and thus, how the pericope should be preached in light of this hope and call to worship.

[19] All biblical quotations are from the New American Standard (NASB 1995) unless otherwise noted.

[20] Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible*, 19 and 25.

Hebrews as a Biblical Model for the Four-Fold Aspect of Contextualization

Having located and described a potential four-fold sense of contextualization for preaching, a biblical justification for employing such an approach should be sought. Therefore, a brief analysis of a portion of the book of Hebrews will be conducted by using the four aspects of contextualization identified above as the guide. The goal is to offer a biblical model for effectively using each of the four aspects of contextualization in a sermon. Due to the limited space of the current study, if one occurrence of each aspect can be found within the Hebrews, then perhaps a biblical precedent, rather than a merely practical one, can be given for the use of multiple levels of contextualization in expository preaching. Before proceeding to this investigation, a rationale for using Hebrews as a sermonic model will be presented. Then, the Melchizedekian priesthood concept present in the book will be traced briefly in order to be offered as a template for employing this four-fold contextualization in expository preaching.

In his book, *Preaching for a Verdict*, J. Josh Smith argued that Hebrews is a model for exhortation in expository preaching. He contends, "Perhaps no book of the New Testament gives a greater example of exhortation than Hebrews."[21] His primary argument for employing Hebrews as such a model for exhortation in preaching was not simply that Hebrews exhorts the reader as its primary aim, but that Hebrews also was originally intended to be a written sermon.[22] Smith argues for this position based on the current state of scholarship, the linguistic structure of the book, and the stated purpose of the author himself being a "word of exhortation" (Heb 13:22).[23] He concludes, "Although Hebrews remains a book about which much debate ensues, it is now generally recognized that the book of Hebrews was originally a written sermon."[24] Note David Allen's summation, which Smith himself quoted in his work: "The frequent and well-placed imperative and hortatory subjunctives coupled with the interweaving of exposition and exhortation supports its sermon nature."[25] Smith's conclusion is that Hebrews, then, contains more than

[21] J. Josh Smith, *Preaching for a Verdict: Recovering the Role of Exhortation* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 87.

[22] Smith, *Preaching for a Verdict*, 88–89.

[23] See also Smith, *Preaching for a Verdict*, 87–89.

[24] Smith, *Preaching for a Verdict*, 88.

[25] David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 25. See also

simply the content of exhortation but is also itself a model for preaching: "Because of this, the book of Hebrews is itself not just a call to exhort, but also an example of exhortation in preaching. If seen as it truly is, one will then see it as an 'excellent model for any preacher.'"[26]

If Smith's underlying understanding is correct, can the same approach to mining Hebrews as justification for the use of other biblical elements of expository preaching be borrowed by the current study? The answer would seem to be "yes." Below is the methodology that will be used to discover if the preacher may and even should consider multiple contexts when interpreting a pericope and preaching an expository sermon.[27]

With this justification established, this study will now briefly examine how the author of Hebrews uses aspects of contextualization for an effective "sermon" in the lives of his contemporary audience. In order to do this, the study will focus specifically on how the author uses the notion of the Melchizedekian priesthood. This concept is first raised in the Bible in Genesis 14 and then perhaps first referenced messianically in Psalm 110. In Hebrews, the concept of Christ as the ultimate and final High Priest may be implied from the beginning paragraph of the book: "When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb 1:3). Certainly, Christ as the Christian's High Priest is foundational for the aim of the book as a whole: "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, *yet* without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so

Smith, *Preaching for a Verdict*, 89.

[26] Smith, *Preaching for a Verdict*, 89. See also Andrew Lincoln, *Hebrews: A Guide* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 22.

[27] It should be acknowledged that Smith used Hebrews in a more direct way than this present study is proposing. After discovering and highlighting the "written exhortation" component of the book, he used this information as the foundation for employing exhortation in text-driven preaching today. This current study is using the book of Hebrews and the argument that it is a sermon in a less direct way. However, at a foundational level the methodology still seems valid. For instance, if Hebrews is indeed a written sermon, as thus its employment of one element of preaching, namely exhortation, should be done in preaching today; then, if some other elements of interpretation and/or preaching are also found to be present in the book, namely the concepts of contextualization, would it not seem to follow that these aspects should be used in contemporary preaching as well? It is at this level only that this study is borrowing from Smith's model.

that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:15–16).

The first explicit mention of the Christological priesthood in the book of Hebrews is in 2:17: "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Furthermore, Melchizedek and the concept of his priesthood, which the author seems to indicate is of a different order or kind, is introduced in chapter 5: "Just as He says also in another passage, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (v. 6). And later in the same chapter the author continues to argue, "And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 5:9–10). However, the specific explanation of Melchizedek in his historical and canonical context, which sets the basis for the type of priest of which Christ is the archetype, is not raised by the author until chapter 7. The Melchizedekian priesthood and its use by Psalm 110 is the basis for what the author is intending to teach about Christ and therefore the authority for the audience's response to his exhortation (Heb 8:1).

With this overall theme in view, how the author of Hebrews used the Melchizedek priesthood in his "sermon" in reference to the four aspects of contextualization will be discussed below. The goal will be to find one example of each and offer a brief explanation of their uses in order to justify that the reference does indeed constitute the particular aspect of contextualization.

The Historical Context in Hebrews

First, we consider the historical context for the interpretation and use of Melchizedek in Hebrews. Remember this aspect is primarily concerned with such concepts as purpose and occasion and meaning as related to the original author's intent to his primary audience. Its principal function is determining what the pericope or concept meant in its original or historical setting and is foundational for understanding how to use Scripture in a valid or objective way. Did the author of Hebrews consider this context for his reference to Melchizedek and his priesthood? As has already been argued above, the author first references "the order of Melchizedek" and his priesthood in chapter 5. In this chapter, the primary reference is to Psalm 110 and not Genesis 14. Furthermore, there does not appear to be any concern or consideration of a historical reference to Melchizedek at this point.

However, chapter 5 is only the introduction of this concept. The ex-

planation of Melchizedek and the important tenets of his priesthood for the contemporary audience are not raised until chapter 7. There, at least two or three primary related points are made of Melchizedek's priesthood: it was perpetual, without beginning or end, indicated by him having no genealogy recorded in Genesis; it was greater than the Levitical priesthood, indicated by the explanation that Levi (through his father Abraham) paid tithes to Melchizedek; and it did not follow the natural decent of the physical law through Aaron but was a priesthood of a different order. Even though no direct quote of Genesis 14 is used, the author makes his case through an obvious allusion to Genesis 14:17–20, which both respects and explains the historical context. Consider the following:

> For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all *the spoils*, was first of all, by the translation *of his name*, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually. (Heb 7:1–3)

The author of Hebrews certainly referenced and explained the historical context of the Melchizedekian priesthood in order to make his ultimate point about Christ's priesthood and apply it to his audience.

The Canonical Context in Hebrews

Second, we consider the canonical context for the use of Melchizedek, and specifically his unique priesthood, in Hebrews. Remember, here the main point in discerning the canonical context is to consider a context that extends beyond the immediate passage being investigated. The primary aim in this process is to look for how meaning or the truth(s) located in the immediate historical context of a passage or biblical idea has a trajectory through the rest of the canon or perhaps even finds its terminus in another location in Scripture. In Hebrews, simply by the fact that the author quotes Psalm 110 (which itself already contains intertextuality) no less that than four times and applies it to Christ shows that he is completely aware of and knows the importance of the canonical aspect of contextualization. Additionally, the author of Hebrews references the history of Genesis 14:17–20 in order to demonstrate that Christ fulfills the unique "order" of the Melchizedekian priesthood of Psalm 110. The connection of this content further strengthens the case for the intentional understanding and use of canonical context in Hebrews.

Ultimately, by referencing Genesis 14 through Psalm 110, the author of Hebrews communicates a bigger understanding of the theological truth of the Melchizedekian priesthood as it was being projected in the canon messianically. Taking it to its natural conclusion in his "sermon," the author shows the terminus of this idea in Christ.

> For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests. And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become *such* not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of *Him*, 'You are priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'" (Heb 7:14–17)

The author of Hebrews certainly utilized the canonical context of the Melchizedekian priesthood in order to make his ultimate point that Christ's priesthood was the fulfillment of this priesthood for the sake or advantage of his audience.

The Contemporary Context in Hebrews

Third, we consider the contemporary context of the use of the Melchizedekian priesthood, directly applied to Christ, by the author of Hebrews. This aspect is essentially why the text matters, or the "so what," to the contemporary audience. This context may be equally essential for any effective preaching as is the historical context. Remember, the contemporary context must concern itself with the *real* audience—their background, hurts, struggles, experiences, needs, and brokenness—and lead to preaching in such a way that these are addressed in the sermon. In order to investigate if Hebrews concerned itself with the contemporary context, we need to understand the historical purpose and occasion of the book. Although consensus on the issue is impossible, Allen's general statement proves helpful.

> Whatever the crisis facing the readers, it is clear that the author viewed them as Christians, most likely Jewish Christians, and he alternatively warned and encouraged them to press on to maturity in the faith. A determination of purpose must take into account that the epistle is primarily pastoral in nature and only secondarily doctrinal…. Thus, the necessity of pressing on to maturity in the midst of difficulty (6:1–3) by means of drawing near, holding

fast, and stirring one another up to love and good works (10:19–25) would appear to serve as a viable statement of purpose.[28]

Upon further investigation of the content of the book, that these Jewish believers were, either by an unintentional drift or an intentional departure, in danger of slipping away or abandoning their walk with God through their worship of Christ seems obvious (see 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 6:1–12; 10:19–39; and 12:14–29).

Why did the author write to his audience or "preach this sermon"? Allen asserts that it is to exhort them to "press on to maturity" (6:1), and the author does so by giving a warning not to drift and a call to pay attention (2:1; 4:11; and 10:26–27). Perhaps, then, the most relevant question for this study is on what basis was this call to press on to maturity and avoiding drifting away. For the author of Hebrews, the Melchizedekian priesthood fulfilled in Christ is at least part of the authoritative basis on which the purpose of the book is laid. Namely, his is a priesthood with a high priest who can sympathize with the weakness of the audience yet remain without sin. His is a permanent priesthood. And, his is a priesthood which mediates of the better covenant.

> But Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath which came after the Law, *appoints* a Son, made perfect forever. (Heb 7:24–28)

Jesus's permanent and better priesthood becomes one of the reasons for the audience not to "shrink back" but to "press on to maturity:" "And since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:21–22). The author of Hebrews utilized the Christological fulfillment of the Melchizedekian priesthood in order to address the real background, hurts, struggles, experiences, needs, and brokenness of his

[28] Allen, *Hebrews*, 82.

audience.

The Eschatological Context in Hebrews

Finally, we consider the eschatological context as related to the Christological fulfillment of the Melchizedekian priesthood in Hebrews as the ultimate hope for the audience. Remember, this aspect is referring to how the theology or biblical truth(s) of the pericope under investigation connects to the "so what" in a consummatory way providing the ultimate hope to the dilemma of the audience. This hope is futuristic and transcends the current place and time of the physical world by finding its foundation in the reigning King and his kingdom. As mentioned above, this context may be the most difficult to locate specific references to in biblical interpretation and biblical preaching texts. Perhaps it comes as no surprise, then, that this context is the least observable in the corpus of Hebrews.

The eschatological aspect of the Melchizedekian priesthood is indeed in Hebrews, but it is much more indirect. In order to find how this context is being used, we will consider the book on a macro-level. When we do this, we see once more that the author's method is the connection to and use of Psalm 110. In Heb 1:4, he quotes Psalm 110, but not the verses directly related to the Melchizedekian priesthood. Rather, in comparing the divine Son to the angels, which shows his superiority, the author concludes by citing the verse 1 which contains the promises of God to a mighty King and Lord to make all his enemies his footstool: "But to which of the angels has He ever said, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'?" (Heb 1:13). Thus, he uses the whole context of Psalm 110 to link subtly the victorious kingship of the Messiah, the perpetual priesthood of the Messiah, and to set up a larger point.

Then, in chapter 2, by sympathizing with the current condition of his audience, he acknowledges that we presently do not see everything in subjection to Jesus. So, the author quotes a section of Psalm 8, which implies a similar concept as Ps 110:1: "'You have put all things in subjection under His feet.' For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him" (Heb 2:8). However, this current condition has a purpose and is only temporary. The author implies the "lowering" of the Messiah is only for a little while, and the audience will see eventually all things, including his enemies, under his feet as a footstool:

> But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste

> death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. (Heb 2:9–10)

The question is how and, perhaps more importantly, when will this reversal of the lowering occur? For the author of Hebrews, the answer to the "how" appears to be in the Christological fulfillment of the superiority and permanence of the Melchizedekian high priesthood promised in Psalm 110: "Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, 'sat down at the right hand of God,' waiting from that time onward 'until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet'" (Heb 10:11–13). And, for the author the "when" seems to be the implied eschaton, which is also assured because of the Messianic High Priest's finished work of making purification of sins: "So Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without *reference* to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" (Heb 9:28). The author clearly uses an eschatological aspect of the Melchizedekian priesthood motif in his "sermon." The ultimate hope for this audience's current dilemma, who they should look to, and the sole basis for pressing on to maturity while enduring hardship is a consummatory one. It is Christ, his permanent high priesthood, and the promise of not only his coming but the total and complete subjugation of his enemies.

Implications for Contemporary Preaching

Considering how the author of Hebrews presented his "sermon," it does appear there is a biblical precedent and model for a four-fold approach to contextualization. This model, then, can and perhaps should be used in biblical exposition. With this in mind, this essay will now conclude by offering five implications for contemporary preaching.

First, exegete the text and the audience. This suggestion is perhaps the least novel and most obvious one. However, the study of Hebrews does indeed confirm what we have always known and argued for in expository preaching. There are at least two components to consider for an effective expository sermon: the text and the audience. We must continue to find the content and substance of our messages in the valid, authoritative interpretation of Scripture that is embedded in the objective truth of the historical context of the pericope. And, we must consider the audience. We must translate and communicate that objective biblical truth to our audience in a way they understand and that intersects with their lives. We practice the truth that we are preaching to people. The quote

that has often been attributed to Danny Akin seems particularly apropos here: "What we say is more important than how we say it, but how we say it has never been more important."[29]

Second, preach to who you were and really still are. This is an extension or "Part B" of the previous implication. However, a helpful question when we are considering the audience in front of us is not only to think *about* your audience but to think *like* your audience. Consider their backgrounds and experiences and immerse yourself in their hurts, struggles, needs, and brokenness. Think about who you used to be before you were a believer and think about the struggles you still currently carry as a believer. This practice will help make the audience "real" and a real part of your sermon process. Zack Eswine, in *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, framed the importance of this approach for us: "And I have been asking myself this question: Could I now reach who I once was? . . . Every preacher needs to ask this question."[30] Preach in such a way that it would reach who you used to be and connect to who you still are.

Third, connect the big story. Since the beginning when God spoke to his people, he has always been saying the same thing, although he has said it finally in Christ. The practice of the author of Hebrews confirms this perspective. Therefore, when you preach, show the consistency of Scripture and the interconnectedness of the entire canon. Wherever you are in the Bible, and whatever truth you are preaching, show the audience how that theology projects through the tapestry of the entire canon. This will show the consistency and goodness of God and the fullness of Scripture and make for a richer understand of Scripture in the lives of your hearers.

Fourth, giv'em Jesus. The argument for the need to preach Christ in every sermon from every text has been made multiple times over and models for doing so are readily accessible. Summarizing those perspectives here are not necessary. However, in light of what has been observed in Hebrews, reaffirming that a distinctively Christian sermon is not complete until a definitive connection to Christ has been made seems appropriate. Therefore, wherever you are in the Bible, and whatever truth you are preaching, show the audience how the tapestry of the entire canon legitimately connects to or finds its terminus in Christ. The author of Hebrews certainly applied this practice with Old Testament

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[29] See Akin, Allen, and Matthews, *Text-Driven Preaching*, 7.

[30] Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 11.

pericopes and the centrality of Christ. The contemporary expositor is called to do the same.

Finally, don't quit until you're finished. From the conclusions drawn from the practice of the Hebrews' "sermon," a case can be made that all preaching should end with a call to hope, even the ones that contain warnings or judgment motifs and certainly ones that address those facing hardship. We do not have to preach people into despair; in our culture they probably arrived at the sermon already there. We must paint them a picture of hope—ultimate hope that is consummatory and found beyond this time, beyond this world, and beyond any earthly kingdoms. Remember when we preach, we are expositing the King and his kingdom. In him, there is ultimate and final hope, and in it, our audience can reside now as a foretaste of that which is indeed to come. Show your audience this hope and invite them into it now. Preach every sermon with this hope in view.

Conclusion

In *Hebrews: A Guide*, Andrew Lincoln seemed to acknowledge indirectly that the author of Hebrews did aim at and accomplish some level of these four aspects of contextualization.

> Clearly Hebrews is not the sort of sermon that has been produced on the spur of the moment. Its preacher has felt his way into the problems and discouragements his hearers are facing, reflected on them deeply as he pondered the Scriptures, and been given the insights to make connections with their situation. In the process his sermon becomes the vehicle for God's earlier word, as it is read in the light of reflection on the significance of what God has now done in Christ, speaking again to the hearers. But that is not all. The preacher has clearly worked hard at crafting the sermon, choosing what will be the most effective language and employing all the rhetorical skills at his disposal to ensure that its argument will convince, that it will capture both his hearer's minds and their emotions, and that it will press home his message with urgency and compassion. Seen in this way, it can be said to contain features that make it an excellent model for any preacher. What is more, it reflects a confidence about the efficacy of preaching.[31]

[31] Lincoln, *Hebrews*, 21–22.

Preach! Preach trusting the efficacy of preaching. Preach having felt your way into and deeply reflected on the problems and discouragement of your hearers. Preach having pondered the Scriptures. Preach pressing the message into both the hearer's minds and emotions. And yes, preach in context, following the example of the author of Hebrews, that great biblical herald of God's eternal Word.