

Engage360 | Episode 29: The Unity of Scripture

- Introduction: Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.
- Dr. Don Payne: Hello again. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host, and we are grateful that you have joined us. Over the last few years people's relationship to religion in general and Christianity in particular has become the object of significant study. The Pew Research Center is one of the organizations that has devoted considerable attention to the phenomenon of people leaving faith or claiming no religious affiliation whatsoever, such as the Nones, and studies like those coming out of The Pew Center identify disbelief or crisis of faith as one of the top reasons for religious disaffection. I don't know how much research has been done on the specific reasons for disbelief or crisis of faith, but there is plenty of anecdotal evidence from conversations that seminary professors have and in that pool of anecdotal evidence is a recurring and a deep unease with the way God is portrayed in some parts of the Bible. Now this is not always expressed in theologically precise language, but the sentiment is very clear that the God of the Old Testament seems very different from the God of the New Testament. A number of issues emerged from this including the unity and reliability of scripture as a whole and the trustworthiness of a God who seems to exhibit character traits that are really at odds with some modern sensibilities, and it's not merely those who overtly leave the faith or show up in studies like The Pew Center conducts. It's not merely those who have misgivings. There's plenty of anecdotal evidence also that lots of regular churchgoers and self-professed, committed Christians struggle deeply with these matters. So, to help us find some handholds and perspective on all this, we have with us this week two of our esteemed colleagues from our biblical studies faculty, Dr. Rick Hess from the Old Testament department and Dr. Craig Blomberg from the New Testament department, and both of these men have been on our faculty for a long time, Dr. Blomberg since 1986 I believe and Dr. Rick Hess: since 1997. Is that correct?
- Dr. Rick Hess: That is right.
- Dr. Don Payne: Both are widely published, widely known, widely respected so I won't take the time to go over their background or credentials this time, but I want to say welcome to both of you to the podcast. Glad to have you here.
- Dr. Craig Blomberg: Thank you very much.
- Dr. Rick Hess: Thanks.
- Dr. Don Payne: So, what have each or either of you observed about some of these recent tendencies to polarize The Old and New Testaments and polarize the God of the Old and the God of the New Testaments and maybe to what effects have you seen this phenomenon?

Dr. Craig Blomberg: Well you're right. It is something that you hear quite a bit about. I suspect that there are at least a couple of reasons why maybe you hear more about it today than in some past decades and one is the popularity of some of the so-called aggressive atheists, people like Richard Dawkins and others, whose books and online materials have had wide currency. So, people then become aware of these issues and ask about them but also the general decline of Bible knowledge or Bible literacy in the country. I was certainly very much aware as even a child about the conquest of the land by the Israelites over the Canaanites, for example, never heard the word genocide applied to that because, in fact, genocide means killing of an entire race or group of people and it was nowhere near that when you actually see the results that occurred and the number of people who were left in the land but it was an age when people had a general sense of, oh yeah God predicted. He was waiting over 400 hundred years he said for the sins of the Amalekites to reach their full measure and these were horribly wicked people and whether people believed in a hell and a heaven or not the idea of judgment, and judgment is part of religion, and it's part of Christianity was pretty well known. Today we live in an age when you can tolerate just about anything except intolerance and judgment and the very fact that the Bible talks about judgment is unpalatable in many people, but there's plenty of it in the New Testament as well as the Old.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, judgment has become sort of the 4-letter word of our culture hasn't it?

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah. Well, I think there is a broad sense and I don't want to speculate on where it comes from, I suspect from a variety of different positions, but I remember a couple of years ago getting on an airplane and sitting next to a fellow and we got to talking. He saw that I had I think a Bible or some biblical material I was reading at the time and so asked me about it and I began to explain. He said, "Well, you know my trouble with the Bible is God and he just seems so mean and nasty." So, it made for a fruitful conversation for much of the rest of the flight, but I think that is an example that always sticks in my mind of what is a general feeling among people. This era, this age is the age that finds it very easy to criticize the Bible on the basis of the Old Testament God being mean and either therefore God is a God I don't want anything to do with or that clearly is a contradiction to the New Testament God who is a God of love and therefore we should really look at a whole different way in which we see the Bible and its revelation. So, I think these things have created a sense in which people indeed judge the Bible and judge God as judgmental and yet if there is truth there is falsehood. If there is righteousness there is unrighteousness. These are basic categories which have existed in western thought ever since the beginning of Christianity and certainly before that both in Judaism and Greek philosophy and thought that influenced it, but I think there has been a loss of this way of thinking or even its acceptance.

Dr. Don Payne: It reminds me of the early Marcionite teaching that polarized the God of the Old Testament against the God of the New Testament. Of course, that was in the second century or so. Does it seem to you like this is maybe a recycled version of Marcionite teaching? Is there anything different about it that you can see?

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah, I think it continues. I think it's always been there, and I think there has always been a sense that there is a lot more going on in the Old Testament with God judging people but as Craig was saying people who know their Bible know that that happens in the New Testament too. So, you can't simply separate one testament from the other and the God of the Old Testament is a God of love. In fact, the very categories of love, grace, mercy, kindness begin there in Exodus 32 and the Psalms, in Deuteronomy 6, again and again in the very law that people often appeal to as an example of the nastiness of God.

Dr. Craig Blomberg: I think one of the things that I know Dr. Hess has talked about in some of his writings is the uniqueness of how much of God's judgment in the Hebrew Scriptures is against his own people. I am not aware that there's any other world religion that comes close to being as candid or as detailed about the failures of those who are considered God's people as in the Christian Old and New Testaments and you want an example of love, my goodness read the prophet Hosea where as a pattern or model of God's care for the children of Israel the prophet is told to marry a prostitute and even after she is unfaithful again to take her back and when you read how many, many times there is forgiveness from God even after repeated and prolonged sin and that also in both testaments it's very hard to put a wedge between the two.

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah, there is no greater example in my mind of God's love than Hosea 11:8-9 where he speaks to his people and as Dr. Blomberg said it's a matter of God being a warrior, a warrior sometimes against his own people and he says, you know you've done all these things. You deserve all the wrath that I bring against you because of what you've done, you my people. Yet my heart is turned within me and I cannot treat you like Admah and Zeboim, two of the five cities of the plain along with Sodom and Gomorrah that God destroyed so long before. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst. There is this wonderful expression there of God's compassion that he will, he could, I mean the old theologians will say you know we all deserve death because we have all sinned and yet that is not who God is. He is loving and compassionate and gracious and merciful but at the same time as Exodus 32:4-6 says, he will not be tricked. He will not be treated in a way that is cavalier and casual and assumes that he is just not a significant figure.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, you cannot trifle with the Holy One.

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah, God is not mocked.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, God is not mocked. The way you put that, Rick, the very eloquent way you put that brings to mind the integration of justice and mercy which those themes seem so often polarized at least in conversations you know we would all be aware of today where judgment is sort of a self-contained, negative, destructive dismissal and mercy is something in utterly polarized fashion that is acquitting and you know turning a blind eye to anything that's wrong and the picture that you're both drawing to the surface of the biblical, the God of the Bible who judges, is that judgment always has a redemptive end to it. Judgment always has a redemptive character; it's driven by God's love. Can you talk a little bit

more about that, how those two - judgment and mercy - judgment and redemption, how those two are interconnected?

Dr. Craig Blomberg: Well you certainly see it in the New Testament with some of the apparently harshest punishments. A passage that commentators are divided on as to what is actually happening appears in 1 Corinthians Chapter 5 where there is a man who has flagrantly and apparently over a prolonged period of time been thumbing his nose at what even in the Greek and Roman world was considered absolute fundamental morality in that he is having a relationship, sleeping with, the NIV says, his father's wife and so Paul's words are hand this man over. This is 1 Corinthians 5:5 to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. Now does that mean the destruction of the sin nature as it's sometimes called or does it actually mean that he is released to the domain of Satan for physical death. Whichever it is, the verse continues so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord and there's the redemptive piece, a classic example of what you're talking about, I think.

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah, you have it. In the Old Testament as well I think of the great covenant that God makes with David in 2 Samuel 7 where he speaks about how he is going to forever, he will build a house for David and forever in that dynasty which is what the house refers to there will be a ruler on the throne of Judah who will rule and that looks forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. From the New Testament perspective it's completely fulfilled in Christ but he does say there that in any generation there may be a king who turns away and who does that which is wrong and he says I will punish him but I will never take away my covenantal mercies which I have promised to you, David, and to your dynasty. I think it's an example of the way in which God remains faithful even where there is faithlessness and he is a father to us and as a father who is loving he does discipline as well in order that he may show his love.

Dr. Don Payne: I wonder if it's also helpful to think a little more deeply about the concept of judgment and even the words that are used for judgment. In our day there seems to me at least to be a sort of one-dimensional understanding of what judgment is, that judgment is always and in every case a dismissive condemnation but as I understand you friends are the language experts here but as I understand the wording used for judgment, to judge, is to assess. It is to weigh, to scrutinize, to see and expose things as they really are and in that type of judgment, judgment sometimes does lead to condemnation of something. Sometimes judgment in that pure sense leads to an acquittal, leads to a recognition of something, in other words judgment is not always and in every case equal to condemnation but, if I'm correct on that, in our culture that word judgment seems to have a sort of one-dimensional signification of condemnation. Is that a correction maybe that needs to be made in this whole conversation?

Dr. Craig Blomberg: Yeah, I think it is and it's kind of ironic because if you just use the noun judge, well we have judges in the courtroom, we have judges at athletic competitions, we have judges for American Idol and nobody assumes that, especially if you

take Simon Cowell out of the picture, that we're always talking about something negative. Actually Simon is, from my experience –.

Dr. Don Payne: He's not always negative.

Dr. Craig Blomberg: He is not always negative either but then there's something about well if a judge renders a judgment you would think that those two words would have a similar range of connotations in people's minds but I think you're absolutely right. It makes no sense to say that we are never to assess or analyze or critique anything. My goodness, people are doing that daily on Facebook and sometimes in judgmental ways but not always.

Dr. Don Payne: They do that every time they have a cup of coffee.

Dr. Craig Blomberg: If it's not the best coffee.

Dr. Don Payne: If it's not the best coffee, right.

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah, it's very true. In the Old Testament it's interesting that Exodus 21 which sort of begins what is sometimes called the Book of the Covenant is actually called these are the judgments, "Mishpatim" is the original language word there the Hebrew and it goes on to describe how you evaluate, in fact, the very first so-called judgments give slaves rights. In Exodus 21 verses 1-10 slaves receive rights which is unheard of in the rest of the ancient near east. Nowhere else, everywhere else slaves were considered property and value and simply money, equivalent of money, but here they are considered as human beings and they have to be released after a certain time. It's much more like sort of indentured servitude but I just give that as an example that to the contrary the word judgment is entirely different. It suggests rights, it suggests privileges. Later on in Exodus 21 and 22 it says and when a judge judges he shall not show favor to the rich over the poor and it says and he shall not show favor to the poor over the rich. He is to do what is right and you see this right through the Old Testament the famous lines in Micah 6-8, with what shall I come before the Lord. How shall I worship him and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression and then he goes on the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul. He has shown you, O person, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and then in parallel with that and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. These are all three matters that are intimately related. Judgment is not there seen as a negative but as a positive, as justice instead of condemning.

Dr. Don Payne: That reminds me of judgment being part of the redemptive arc of scripture even in what we would now maybe consider small installments like that first instance you quoted but certainly part of that redemptive arc of scripture if we're able to read it carefully and read it deeply. I sometimes have told my theology students that the wrath of God is in the final analysis our friend because who wants to live in a world where evil ultimately is winked at and has the last word and that kind of makes me wonder whether there are other cultural forces, other maybe even psychological but all in all cultural forces that have misshapen in very

broad strokes, misshapen so many people's ability to think about judgment in those deep and nuanced ways and redemptive ways. I mean you two have been around the church for a long time, you've got your ear to the tracks. You have a lot of conversation with a lot of Christians. Are you picking up on anything culturally that has kind of contributed to this or resurfaced this Marcionite tendency?

Dr. Craig Blomberg: Well one of the things I like to say in conversations like this, and it's not the only factor and sometimes it's not the major factor, but the number of people that I have met who once were a part of the church, who once claimed Christian belief but no longer do or who never have, but who are among the angriest people I have met with only a handful of exceptions are usually what we might call our dirty laundry as Christians. Somewhere along the way somebody in the name of Jesus or several somebodies has hurt them deeply by being very harsh, by being very vindictive, or simply by being dismissive or maybe being unable to answer their hard questions and just blowing them off and so it's always a troubling reminder for me that we have to be as best and thoughtfully trained and spoken as we possibly can in Christian circles with everyone.

Dr. Don Payne: Good word.

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah, I think that's really good. I think a long time ago when I was growing up I was a boy, the expectation was in the culture I grew up in that you lived a certain way and if you didn't that was very bad and what was expected of you was the traditional morality of the Bible and how it should be done and I think people outside who saw that and there was a temptation to be legalistic and people complained about hypocrites in the church because they were legalists but they themselves did wrong. Nowadays it's kind of the opposite. No one or few people want to actually talk about something like sin and particularly certain kinds of morality and other issues that are involved and so there's a broader perspective that allows all kinds of things but at the same time then bringing in these categories which are part of the Bible and are part of the way in which God has built the world, he's built them into the world, suddenly become an issue so it's no longer so much the legalism on the one hand but what you mentioned earlier, the judgmentalism.

Dr. Don Payne: Right.

Dr. Rick Hess: On the other which now becomes a statement of hypocrisy as hypocrites who are Christians.

Dr. Craig Blomberg: I think another cultural phenomenon was actually 1977 the year I graduated from college when Karl Menninger's book *Whatever Became of Sin* was a bestseller around the country that's, quick do the mental math, 43 years ago. That's not a new development. At the time, it was shocking because enough of the culture still was profoundly Christian and used the language of sin and so for a psychologist to say there are also significant parts of the culture that no longer talk about this that was jarring but now that we've had a full generation or more there are countless people in our culture who have never had any significant

exposure to groups of people or friends who talk seriously about sin. That's just a foreign language.

Dr. Don Payne: Yeah, they don't have that foil, that backdrop.

Dr. Craig Blomberg: That's right.

Dr. Don Payne: If I can return to Marcionite teaching just for a moment, I know that one of the for as much trouble as Marcion stirred up in the second century over dividing the testaments and the gods supposedly of the testaments, it seems like Marcion ultimately did the early church a favor in maybe a backhanded way by forcing the early church to think more deeply about the problem of evil and the unity of scripture and that makes me wonder what positive outcomes this recycled version of a sort of Marcionite teaching might have for us. Let me state that a little differently. Are there things that we as the church need to look at more deeply in our own understanding of the unity of the scripture or theological themes like the problem of evil, is this phenomenon we're talking about forcing us to clarify our thinking about any of these matters?

Dr. Craig Blomberg: Well I would answer that in at least two ways, one is you cannot open any page of the New Testament without discovering either direct quotations or pretty clear allusions to the Old Testament. So, when I hear high-profile Christian people today say, well we really only need the New Testament, what in the world do they mean by that. Only the little bits that might be colored something other than the majority that contains some Old Testament background to it, I mean that's an impossibility to have the New Testament without the Old because so much of it is embedded in the New. The other response I would give is a much more broad stroke one and that is a lot of people, there are different ways of explaining the relation of the testaments, but one very popular one historically has been to speak about the promise and its fulfillment. If the New Testament is in a significant way the fulfillment of numerous Old Testament promises, how can you possibly understand it without understanding the original promises and the history that led up to it.

Dr. Rick Hess: Yeah, I think the Old Testament and New Testament become essential for the Christian faith and you can't have the New Testament without having the background and understanding of who God is, what sin is about, what the hope for redemption is. Jesus, himself, if we're Christians and wish to follow him, used the Old Testament and particularly I would say the Psalms was his hymn book, his prayer book that was what he meditated on which is why so often he goes back to it and quotes it even from the cross. I often tell people as we go into a study of the Psalms if you want to understand what Jesus said and did you need to study the gospels but if you want to understand also what he thought and felt you need to study the Psalms. They are a source of revelation of who God is that he internalized in himself and this was nothing less than the fulfillment of the command to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and to let these words be upon your heart day and night.

Dr. Craig Blomberg: I also find it fascinating that the three books that both Jesus individually and the New Testament as a whole quote more than any others are one from each of

the three major sections of the Hebrew Scriptures, Deuteronomy from the law, Psalms from the writings, and Isaiah from the prophets, so clearly even as Luke says in Luke 24 that Jesus when he was resurrected began to explain how everything that was written about him in Moses, prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled.

Dr. Don Payne: Hard to miss that linkage. All of this, I think, pushes us to allow God to be perhaps bigger than our preferred notions of God and this is not a chastisement of anybody in particular it's a self-indictment as much as anything. I think a lot of us could probably say that one of our recurring growing edges is to let God be God on God's terms not on our terms and the unity of the testaments will relentlessly force us to do that, not domesticate God, not distill God to the dimensions of our own sensibilities but let God be God on God's own terms. Any final maybe reading recommendations for people or other recommendations for those who are just sincerely struggling with these questions?

Dr. Rick Hess: Well I would recommend that you might want to read Exodus 32-34. It's a wonderful text and I earlier referred to actually Exodus 34 which talks about the revelation of God as compassionate and merciful but it's in the context in which the people that he has had a close relationship with. The first time they're away, the first time they get a chance they start worshipping other Gods and turn completely away from him and he says to Moses stand aside because I'm just going to wipe them out and then Moses intercedes and you get into this close relationship that Moses has with God to bring about almost what appears to be from our perspective a change on the part of God to bring out that loving relationship that exists and as you reflect on that cause Moses says well for your honor and your glory you can't destroy them and God says okay but I'm not going to go with you and then Moses says if you don't go with us we won't go and God says okay I'll go with you and again and again but it's not so much that it's all on Moses' side but it's the manner in which they relate to one another that this is a personal and close and intimate relationship.

Dr. Don Payne: As I read some years ago one put it, we have a God who can be prevailed upon, deeply relational. Craig final recommendations?

Dr. Craig Blomberg: For commentary outside of the Bible itself, I have been amazed at how widespread the Baker Book House Commentary on the Use of the Old Testament and the New Testament has been since it first came out a decade and a bit ago edited by Greg Beale and Don Carson. Contributions on each book of the New Testament and tracing the major uses of the Old Testament in sequence through each of those books with all kinds of helpful commentary.

Dr. Don Payne: Good. Gentlemen, thank you both. Thanks for your time and lending your wisdom and training to this really really tough and crucial set of questions.

We've been interacting with Dr. Craig Blomberg and Dr. Rick Hess from our faculty here at Denver Seminary and, again, want to not only thank them but thank you for spending a half hour or so of your time with us today. We hope you'll do so on a regular basis and if you get a chance and something you hear on Engage360 has been meaningful to you, we hope you'll tell somebody else

about it. Maybe share a tweet or give us a review on your favorite podcast platform and as always, I want to recognize our production team. Sean Truman is on the boards for us today and grateful for his work.

If you would like to communicate with us, please use our email address podcasat@DenverSeminary.edu We would love to hear from you. So, for all of us here, Denver Seminary, we hope we will be able to speak with you again next week. This is Engage360, I'm Don Payne. Have a great week!