

Elenchus Explained

by William H. Shepherd

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Despite its imposing title, the *Elenchus bibliographicus biblicus*, or “Bibliographic index of biblical studies,” is a helpful tool for biblical studies—and not too hard to use, once you learn your way around. From 1920 it appeared as part of the journal *Biblica*; beginning in 1968 it was published as a separate annual volume, and was renamed *Elenchus of Biblica* in 1985. Over the years, despite some minor changes, the format and scope of this tool has remained basically the same: a broad, comprehensive, international, ecumenical, annual listing of books, dissertations, reviews, and articles on the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, intertestamental Judaism, the early patristic period, biblical theology, archeology, and other related topics. Arranged by subject headings (originally in Latin only, but in later years English has been included), it features an alphabetical index of authors, places, Greek/Hebrew words, and individual scriptures (and in some years, also a subject index). For each biblical book, there is a general subject heading, then listings by topics and passages. So there are plenty of ways to look things up in *Elenchus*.

Elenchus may seem imposing to the beginner, with its Latin headings, many abbreviations, and small print, but the learning curve is not steep. Each volume covers a year; to search over multiple years, you must consult multiple volumes. To find your subject, check the table of contents in the front of the book, or one of the indices in the back. For each biblical book, general works are listed first, followed by topical items, followed by items dealing with individual passages. You can easily tell whether an item is a book or an article, since the authors names are printed in bold print for books, italics for articles. The abbreviations that keep the volume to a manageable size are explained

in the front, and are pretty straightforward. Since everything is grouped by subject, it is easy to scan and find what you need.

“But wait a minute,” you may say, “why would I go to the library to look things up in a book, when I could just type a search into the *ATLA Religion Database*, *Old Testament Abstracts*, or *New Testament Abstracts*, all available online?” One reason might be comprehensiveness: *Elenchus* simply has a lot more listings than any of those databases. For example, I opened the 2002 edition of *Elenchus* to the section on the Gospel of Luke and found 60 items in the “general “ section, 16 references to texts and commentaries, 26 topical references, and 158 items referring to particular passages in Luke, for a grand total of 234 items (international students will note that items in many different languages were included). By contrast, a subject search of *ATLA* for “Luke” in 2002 yielded just 94 results, many of which were not particularly relevant to biblical studies; using a Scripture Citation search brought the total down to 72 items. A *New Testament Abstracts* search for keyword “Luke” in 2002 found more items: 243 results. But this search was even less precise, giving me articles about Acts and Galatians, when all I really was interested in was Luke’s Gospel. I would have to spend a lot of time weeding out irrelevant entries if I didn’t have *Elenchus*.

Let’s take a more typical case, since few people are interested in reading everything there is to read about Luke’s Gospel. Suppose I want to study the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. To make things manageable for our example, I begin by going three years back in *Elenchus*, to 2000. I grab three volumes off the shelf, check the table of contents to find the page number for Luke, and scan to the listings for Luke 15. Repeat two more times, and I have found a total of 33 books and articles, including articles in French, German, Italian, Spanish, and even (for any of you who hail from Zagreb) Croatian. Since the articles are all grouped together on the page and easy to see, this search has taken me no more than five minutes. Now I head for the computer

to make my comparison. I search *New Testament Abstracts* for Scripture Citation, Luke 15, years 2000-2002, and I get only 5 items, none from scholarly journals. A change to a keyword search for Luke 15 yields 10 more, with a few in Italian, German, and French (none, unfortunately, in Croatian). Only two of these items have links to full text articles, so the computer has not given me much of a head start. Plus, it's taken me 15 minutes to compose these searches and browse the results (it takes a long time to go down that Scripture Citation page and check everything that begins with "Luke 15"). Similarly, an *ATLA* search yields only 10 items (4 which did not turn up in *New Testament Abstracts*), with two fewer when searching for Scripture Citation. A keyword search for "Prodigal Son" actually brings more results: 17 items (but not all relevant to biblical studies). Unfortunately, these searches have taken me another 10 minutes. (In case you're wondering, a quick Google Scholar search for "Prodigal Son," 2000-2002, yielded 17 items, but only a couple relevant to biblical studies).

So what's the disadvantage of using *Elenchus*, other than having to walk into the library? You've probably already noticed: my search parameters were limited by date, because the latest edition of *Elenchus*, published in 2005, brings coverage only up to 2002. It takes a long time to produce a comprehensive index of everything, so *Elenchus* is typically 3-5 years behind the times when it's published, and it may be a long haul between volumes. This makes *Elenchus* an essential source for finding classic articles and doing comprehensive study, but totally useless for finding the most recent literature (this is where *ATLA* and *New Testament Abstracts* shine, especially when they provide easy links to online articles).

It's always advisable to search more than one source, so the online databases do have their uses. But if you want to know everything under the sun about your topic, *Elenchus* is essential.