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YOUNG PEOPLE'S BIBLES (YPB): IS IT POSSIBLE TO MAKE A GOOD CHOICE?

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During the academic years 1998-99 and 1999-2000 in my university (Pontifical University, Salesiana, Rome) two different seminars, for adult students, were devoted to research the Young People's Bibles (YPB). Knowing how often people engage in a lot of talk without reaching any effective result, we decided on a double program for the research: firstly, to establish some clear criteria; and secondly, to express those criteria in such a way that they can serve as concrete tools for those who need them. For this second goal we decided to prepare a set of forms that would not be too difficult to use, but at the same time be well thought out. In their appearance they would be easy and attractive to use for adults who are not Biblical scholars and who yet have to make a choice of a Bible for young people: parents, pastors, catechists, or teachers, in a family, in a parish, or in a school.

In our meetings there was a lot of lively talk. But we had planned not to stop at the level of talk; we wanted to go on to produce tools that would give real help, and in particular some forms that would be quite short but very practical. In this article I will report only the results of our work, adding a few comments to describe the context and the discussions that led up to them. The forms are perhaps more important than what I say in the rest of this article; in fact, only after using them will it be possible to understand and evaluate the comments.

The discussion phase of our research was characterized by two questions that we heard many times: (1) "Are Young People's Bibles true Bibles?" and (2) "How can an adult person make a good and serious choice of a YPB, without the task being too difficult?" The first of these questions produced some long discussions; and in the end we concluded that YPB are true Bibles, for at least the following reasons:

1. For this special audience (that is, for young people) a YPB is never a substitute but always **the** Bible itself.
2. When young people become adults, often they don't have any other Bible; and so they continue to use their YPB.
3. Adults living with young people often don't have any other Bible; therefore they make use of the YPB that is there.
4. Very often, what adults know of the Bible is what they have learned from their YPB; consequently for them their YPB continues its role as the main point of reference for them.
5. Usually a new "adult" translation of the Bible is accepted only if it is seen to be clearly in harmony with the YPB.
6. Very often, a YPB is like a bridge that enables people to adopt and use an "adult" version or translation later.

It was quite a surprise to me to see the lively and yet patient way those adult students discussed each point. Their great interest and

application was probably because they are involved with young people, as parents, or pastors, or catechists, or teachers, active in a family, or in a parish, or in a school.

In dealing with the second question, "How can an adult person make a good and serious choice of a YPB, without the task being too difficult?" we were eager to start preparing a set of forms straight away; but we had to recognize that this was not such an easy task. Yet, we didn't give up; we went back to the principles that we had already established to see what more we needed to do with them. We saw that when principles are expressed in plain words, maybe they can appear too simple. But we also noted that even simple principles are almost never really put into practice! Therefore we reaffirmed those principles, adding the recommendation that it is necessary to really follow them. The principles are as follows:

1. Before saying what a good YPB should be like, we must carefully analyze at least three or four existing YPBs.
2. Before evaluating a particular YPB, we must compare it with others, and we must describe all of them according to the same systematic procedure.
3. Correct evaluation of a YPB must start with an enquiry that establishes who it is really intended for.
4. Any YPB has to be checked in relation to a list that includes some of the most difficult words and sentences in the Bible.
5. Before being recommended as a good choice, a given YPB must pass an overall test of quality taking into account the most relevant features of a YPB.

At the end, we were able to discuss some drafts and to draw up some practical forms. Originally there were six of these; but here they have been reduced to four. The content of the other two is indicated in the sections below. (The main work in the preparation of the forms was done by Dr Angelo Cecinato.)

In the rest of the article I will give a description of the whole procedure of evaluation and choice.

Six steps for parents, pastors, catechists or teachers

First step: "editorial details"

Several YPBs (at least three or four) must be put together and described. This can be accomplished even in a bookshop. Yet it is incredible how often this step, even though it is extremely simple, is neglected.

Before comparing YPBs, each should be carefully described in terms of its editorial or publication details: author(s) or editor(s); title; publisher, city, and year; number of pages (and weight); number of volumes; cost. To help with this, a very simple form can be prepared.

Here I report only our comments with regard to one of these elements. As everybody knows, **the cost** is very relevant in the choice of a YPB; but sometimes this is only found out at the end. We concluded that it is necessary to know about cost at the beginning of any choice

procedure. This is because if the cost is known or taken into account only at the end, it will have too great an importance, and in fact it can overturn the entire procedure previously carried out – so that a new superficial choice is often made.

Second step: "publishing features"

Before choosing a YPB it is necessary to check whether its main features are already indicated on it (on its cover, for instance, or in its introduction). We really want to avoid surprises such as: "I didn't know that this YPB is so and so ...!" It happens rather often that people evaluate a YPB without seriously taking into account what the YPB itself promises or states about its characteristics and resources.

To evaluate the main features we have prepared a form, and we suggest that it should be filled out carefully for each YPB.

SECOND STEP FORM (Yes/No, A / B / C / ...)

01	Does cover/introduction clearly indicate who is the intended user (youngster, catechist, guide, teacher)?				Y	N
02	Does cover/introduction clearly indicate what is its preferred use (private reading, or teaching, or pastoral)?				Y	N
03	Does cover/introduction clearly indicate the limits of this YPB?				Y	N
04	In fact, this YPB is: full Bible text (A), some part of the Bible (B), a collection of passages (C).			A	B	C
05	If not full text, are parallel or absent pasages indicated?				Y	N
06	The selection is: well balanced (A); biased (B); uncertain (C).			A	B	C
07	If a collection, the choice is based on: narrative episodes (A) chronological-historical (B), Bible characters (C) other (D).		A	B	C	D
08	The offered biblical text is a: translation (A), paraphrase (B), synthesis (C) mixture (D).		A	B	C	D
09	Is the user informed of this choice?				Y	N
10	Does the YPB indicate which translation is used?				Y	N
11	Compared with the translation used in the liturgy, this one is: identical (A), alternative-hard (B), complementary-easy (C).			A	B	C
12	If identical or alternative-hard, does it explain the difficult words?				Y	N
13	Does this YPB have a set of comments, notes, glosses?				Y	N
14	Explanations are: good (A), intelligible (B), not valuable(C).			A	B	C
15	Explanations are suitable for young people of this age: 6-8 (A), 9-11 (B), 12-14 (C), 15-17 (D), 18-20 (E).	A	B	C	D	E
16	The aids included (notes maps, appendixes, and so on) are: many (A) enough (B), limited (C), absent (D).		A	B	C	D
17	The number of illustrations is: large (A), enough (B), limited (C) none (D).		A	B	C	D
18	Purpose of illustrations: realistic-informative (A) ornamental (B).				A	B
19	Do illustrations help the text (A), or tend to replace it (B)?				A	B
20	Does this YPB come with other media (CD, floppy disk, video)?				Y	N

Third step: "usefulness and affordability"

We took the view that, here also, those who want to make a choice must be practical and careful. Often, and rather vaguely, people say that a YPB is "more or less good ..."; and their comments will be right, because any translation or publication can be good in some aspects. But such general and superficial comments don't help very much in making an informed choice. Comments will be much more helpful if they include a detailed analysis of features. It is therefore recommended that we have a clear form and that we complete it in a systematic and patient way.

Here I will give a very simple example. This form to be filled in for the evaluation indicates five different age levels, and for each of them it presents a set of five factors. The suitability of a YPB must be evaluated in relation to them: to the question "is L/I/B/A/P good or appropriate?" the answer has to be just "Y" or "N". At the end, the person who has to make a choice can answer Y/N to the "total" question, "Is this YPB good for the young person of the given age?"

THIRD STEP FORM

L – about the level of language (words, structures, ...)
I – about the illustrations – informative or suggestive
B – about the body shape (size, weight, cover, type, —)
A – about the appearance of text for reading (print type, text layout, ...)
P – about the price: is it cheap for all (a), many (b), not many (c), none (d) ?

Age years	L language		I illustration		B Body		A appearance		P price				Total	
06–08	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	a	b	c	d	Y	N
09–11	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	a	b	c	d	Y	N
12–14	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	a	b	c	d	Y	N
15–17	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	a	b	c	d	Y	N
18–29	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	a	b	c	d	Y	N

Fourth step: "difficult words"

Here again, general comments are not good enough. Those who want to make an informed choice must do two things:

1. They must have a list that they can use, one that is well founded but not too long, made up of selected words that are "difficult" for young people. For example, for the OT words like Adar, Baal, circumcised, ... ; and for the NT words like abba, amen, Gehenna, rabbi, mustard, sycomore.
2. For each word in the list they must check
   if it is used by the translation, or not;
   if that word is translated by another easier word, or not;
   if that word is explained in a footnote or in a glossary.

Obviously, a simple form could be prepared for this task, with two sections: first section, a list of OT words; second section, a list of NT words.

Fifth step: "difficult sentences"

The degree of acceptability of a text often depends not only on the individual words but on strings of words (expressions or sentences). Here again, the approach of evaluating a YPB by using general indications appears all too frequent – and painfully useless. We came to these conclusions: firstly, a list of typical difficult sentences is needed, and that list must be carefully prepared by experts in Bible translation; secondly, the list itself must be broad enough to permit a global evaluation, yet simple enough to be easily used by average people.

In dealing with this question, we noted that YPBs may adopt a traditional translation, or they may use an alternative translation. They may also refer (by footnote or other means) to other translations or renderings that are not the same as their text.

In preparing the double form below, which we hope can be easily filled in (even in a bookshop), we chose two Bible translations as points of reference. For those who read this article in English,

a refers to the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, 1966 (RSVCE)

b refers to the Good New Bible, Bible Societies edition, 1979 (GNB)

(The "form" itself makes use of a list used by some UBS consultants.)

During our seminars it was strongly underlined that any person involved in a choice procedure needs to be patient and to take all the time needed for a serious analysis. In our experience these forms are really fruitful, even though they can be filled in quite quickly. After possible embarrassment about the process at first, their use takes only a few minutes. The scope of the list in the above form has been prepared as a good balance between speed and detail. However, to be as practical as possible, we have allowed for two other situations, and for them we suggest:

1. if some people are in a hurry and have only a short time, they can take only the odd or the even numbered items in the list; or
2. if some people have plenty of time, for each item they can check the entire verse and the following one; they could, moreover, add to the list other passages that are seen as controversial in their social context.

Sixth step: "final text"

At this stage it is possible for people to feel that they have reached the goal of the process, that is, the choice of a suitable YPB. But during the seminars it became clear to us that it is wise to take a bit more time for a final and overall check. Thus, in order to focus on the most important points again, a new form was prepared (where some questions are clearly a repetition of those in the earlier forms).

FIFTH STEP FORM – OT

S – compare the translation adopted; is it very similar to RSVCE/GNB? Q – do footnotes quote another translation not used for the text? **OT**				**S**		**Q**	
1	Gen	a	The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.	Y	N	Y	N
	1.2	b	The ppower of God was moving over the waters.	Y	N	Y	N
2	Gen	a	When the Lord smelled the pleasing odour.	Y	N	Y	N
	8.21	b	The odour of the scrifice pleased the Lord	Y	N	Y	N
3	Gen	a	If I have found favour in your sight ...	Y	N	Y	N
	18.3	b	I am here to serve you ...	Y	N	Y	N
4	Exo	a	... burnt offerings and ... peace offerings.	Y	N	Y	N
	20.24	b	Offerings to be completely burnt and ... fellowship offerings	Y	N	Y	N
5	Deut	a	You sowed your seed and watered it with your feet ...	Y	N	Y	N
	11.10	b	You had to work hard to irrigate the fields ...	Y	N	Y	N
6	2 Kgs	a	Let me inherit a double share of your spirit.	Y	N	Y	N
	2.9	b	Let me receive the share of your power.	Y	N	Y	N
7	2 Kgs	a	Elisha ... poured water on the hanbds of Elijah	Y	N	Y	N
	3.11	b	Elisha ... was Elijah's assistant.	Y	N	Y	N
8	2 Chr	a	... until the land has enjoyed its sabbaths.	Y	N	Y	N
	36.21	b	... to make up for the Sabbaths rest ... not been observed.	Y	N	Y	N
9	Psa	a	In sin did my mother conceive me.	Y	N	Y	N
	51.5	b	From the time I was conceived, I have been sinful.	Y	N	Y	N
10	Psa	a	He remembered that they were but flesh.	Y	N	Y	N
	78.39	b	He remembered that they were only mortal beings.	Y	N	Y	N
11	Psa	a	He apportioned them for a possession.	Y	N	Y	N
	78.55	b	He divided their land among the tribes of Israel.	Y	N	Y	N
12	Psa	a	Surely his salvetion is at hand for those who fear him.	Y	N	Y	N
	95.9	b	He is ready to save those who honour him.	Y	N	Y	N
13	Psa	a	The stone rejected ... the head of the corner ...	Y	N	Y	N
	118.22	b	The stone which the builders rejected ... the most important of all ...	Y	N	Y	N
14	Prov	a	Let hew affection fill you at all times with delight ...	Y	N	Y	N
	5.19	b	Let her charms keep you happy.	Y	N	Y	N
15	Prov	a	... when he gives surety for foreigners.	Y	N	Y	N
	20.16	b	... stupid enough to promise to be responsible for a stranger's debt.	Y	N	Y	N
16	Eccles	a	The fool ... eats his own flesh.	Y	N	Y	N
	4.5	b	They say that a man would be a fool to ... let himself starve to death.	Y	N	Y	N
17	Jer	a	... I smote upon my thigh.	Y	N	Y	N
	31.19	b	.. we hung our heads in grief.	Y	N	Y	N
18	Jer	A	... me heart yearns for him.	Y	N	Y	N
	31.20	b	My heart goes out to you ...	Y	N	Y	N
19	Amos	S	... you cows of Bashan.	Y	N	Y	N
	4.1	b	... Women of Samaria who grow fat like the well-fed cows of Bashan.	Y	N	Y	N
20	Micah	A	... who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong.	Y	N	Y	N
	3.10	b	... God's city, Jerusalem, on a foundation of murder and injustice.	Y	N	Y	N

	NT			S		Q	
21	Matt	a	Joseph ... resolved to send her away quietly.	Y	N	Y	N
	1.19	b	... so he made plans to break the engagement privately.	Y	N	Y	N
22	Matt	a	... he knew her not until she had born a son.	Y	N	Y	N
	1.25	b	... he had no sexual relations with her before she gave birth to her son.	Y	N	Y	N
23	Matt	a	Bear fruit that befits repentance.	Y	N	Y	N
	3.8	b	Do those things that will show that you have turned from your sins.	Y	N	Y	N
24	Matt	a	... it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.	Y	N	Y	N
	3.15	b	For in this way we shall do all that God requires.	Y	N	Y	N
25	Matt	a	Hallowed be thy name ...	Y	N	Y	N
	6.9	b	May your holy name be honoured ...	Y	N	Y	N
26	Matt	a	I tel you, you are Peter, and on this rock ...	Y	N	Y	N
	16.18	b	I tell you Peter, you are the rock, and on this rock foundation ...	Y	N	Y	N
27	Luke	a	Hail, full of grace. The Lord is with you.	Y	N	Y	N
	1.28	b	Peace be with you. The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you.	Y	N	Y	N
28	Luke	a	If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father ..	Y	N	Y	N
	14.26	b	... unless he loves me more than he loves his father ..	Y	N	Y	N
29	Luke	a	We are unworthy servants ...	Y	N	Y	N
	17.10	b	We are ordinary servants ...	Y	N	Y	N
30	John	a	And the Word became flesh and ...	Y	N	Y	N
	1.14	b	The word became a human being and ...	Y	N	Y	N
31	John	a	He will convice the world of sin ...	Y	N	Y	N
	16.8	b	He will prove to the people of the world that they are wrong about sin ...	Y	N	Y	N
32	Acts	a	... which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away;	Y	N	Y	N
	1.12	b	... which is about a kilometre away from the city.	Y	N	Y	N
33	Rom	a	... who was descended from David according to the flesh	Y	N	Y	N
	1.3	b	... as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David;	Y	N	Y	N
34	Rom	a	Therefore, since we are justified by faith ...	Y	N	Y	N
	5.1	b	Now that we have been put right with God through faith ...	Y	N	Y	N
35	Rom	a	While we were living in the flesh ...	Y	N	Y	N
	7.5	b	when we lived according to our human nature ...	Y	N	Y	N
36	Rom	a	... for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his	Y	N	Y	N
	12.20	b	head. ... for by doing this you will make him burn with shame.	Y	N	Y	N
37	1 Cor	a	... not many of you were wise according to worldly	Y	N	Y	N
	1.26	b	standards ... From the human point of view few of you were wise ...	Y	N	Y	N
38	1 Cor	a	... for you are still of the flesh.	Y	N	Y	N
	3.3	b	.. because you still live as the people of this world live.	Y	N	Y	N
39	Gal	a	Now the works of the flesh are plain ...	Y	N	Y	N
	5.19	b	What human nature does is quite plain.	Y	N	Y	N
40	1 Peter	a	Therefore gird up your minds, be sober ...	Y	N	Y	N
	1.13	b	So then, have your minds ready for action. Keep alert ...	Y	N	Y	N
	[Optionally, compare also: Matt 3.17; John 1.1; Romans 6.19; 1 Timothy 3.2; Revelation 7.14]						

Looking at the following form, I want to underline the importance of points 2 and 3 (already covered in points 04 and 05 of the SECOND STEP FORM). If young people discover by themselves that their YPB is not a complete Bible, and it doesn't give any indication about its omissions, they can even go so far as to reject the entire YPB – "Who knows how many things they have hidden from me ...!?" Then, along that same line, their distrust can affect even their view of the Bible itself; they can suspect that maybe even it doesn't contain the entire truth, because some religious or political leaders have managed to hide it.

In general the perspective of this final check is rather different and mostly positive; for, while the previous steps make it possible to analyze what a given YPB is like, here the person making the choice has to make sure that a given YPB has the features typical of a good YPB. So, in the last form we list those features, and we offer a tool that can help to check them. In the Y/N columns we mark the answers to the question, "Does this YPB have such and such a feature?" Then, when we see a column of Ys, we can definitely be sure and say: Let us choose that YPB!

SIXTH STEP FORM

	A good YPB has the following features	This YPB?	
1	it leads young people to move on to an official or 'adult' Bible	Y	N
2	It contains the whole Bible	Y	N
3	If not, it indicates which biblical passages it has omitted	Y	N
4	It is accessible, by being easy to read, to individuals or to groups	Y	N
5	It can be used by people of different Christian confessions	Y	N
6	It contains the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books	Y	N
7	It indicates: setting, author, structure of each book	Y	N
8	Difficult terms/concepts are explained in notes/appendixes	Y	N
9	Its references/glossaries/indexes are good for consultation	Y	N
10	In school it can help: history. Arts. Geography, literature ...	Y	N
11	It is linked to some other items (games, book, atlas, art ...)	Y	N
12	Its price can be afforded by the young people it is intended for	Y	N

A final word

During these seminars I realized something that I knew only vaguely before. When a person, or a group of persons, is patient enough to fill out the above forms carefully, we find that the whole experience turns out to be much more instructive, stimulating, and joyful than we could ever imagine. We recommend this process to anyone concerned about Bibles for young people!