

BABES IN PRAYERLAND

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

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"Out of the mouth of babes," I often heard said when a child said something startlingly wise. In a KJV culture, the listener silently completes Ps.8.2 with "hast thou ordained strength." In Mt.21.16, Jesus quotes it (though Mt. takes it from Greek, LXX). And on his own, Jesus thanks God for revealing to "babes" a spiritual wisdom God has hidden for the worldly wise & the learned (Mt.11.25/L.10.21)....The Thinksheet title is an ofttake from Victor Herbert's operetta "Babes in Toyland." More often, the Bible uses "babes" with the opposite meaning, ie as less knowing. And American slang has "babes" as a disparaging reference to attractive young women. And "babes in the woods" means gullible, easily dupable poor souls. So we must abandon the King James Version "babes" for "young children"--as in CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO GOD: The New Collection, collected by Stuart Hample & Eric Marshall (Workman Pub./91). On less than one 3x5 I jotted down the ones I just knew I'd have to share with somebody--you.

While children are often theotropic (see #2538) on their own, we can assume--can't we?--that the children who wrote these letters to God were asked to do so. Obviously, however, the asker was not laying a pious trip on these little ones. The prayers are too bold, even brash, & too familiar, for that.

Dear God, I think about you sometimes even when I am not praying. Elliott. A pure, disinterested theotropicism that touches me twice (especially since he spells his name right). By Elliott's distinction, almost none of my praying is praying; & the proportion of praying in my praying has declined with the years. The upside way to put this is that the amount of my inner thinking about God, a communing without specific adoration, thanksgiving, petition, or intercession, has increased through the yers. Warning: Habitual praying without praying leads to the deadend of not praying at all. Neither private nor public prayer is optional for the Christian. Part of the power of Islam lies in the Qur'an's repeated command to "perform the [five-times-daily] prayers." What does not repeatedly get your attention soon ceases to get your attention at all--which is the unforgivable "sin against the Holy Ghost" ("which," I said in a church discussion group today, "you haven't committed if you worry you may have").

Dear God, I don't ever feel alone since I found out about you. The years have deepened my conviction that precisely that was, for me as a child, the central feeling about experiential religion, the feeling of companionable Presence repeatedly confirmed &, at sixteen, decisively affirmed in conversion &, soon after, in call. It follows, from the fact that this communion is not in spacetime (ie, has "eternal" quality, is with [Moffatt's translation of Elohim] "the Eternal"), it is for me untouchable by bodily death, which is spacetime-bound.

This one is on *chesed*, leal(loyal)-love of God, faithful devotion no matter what, & thus longsuffering. **God: [Noah got laughed at,] but he was smart, he stuck with you. That's what I would do.** Last night our six-year-old granddaughter said "Bruce is going to hell because he says bad words, but I'm going to heaven with Grandma & Grandpa." Grandma & Grandpa don't figure on going to heaven soon, & we like even less the thought that Em(ma) might go with us at her age. Then of course she's in danger of moralism, legalism, censoriousness, works-righteousness, pride, & whatnot. But she's got a good fix on: (1) the fact that deeds have unending ripple-effects; (2) wisdom calculates consequences at hand & remote; (3) reflection on consequences is a wall against temptation; (4) we are responsible for choosing our optional associates, knowing that (as KJV puts it) "evil communications corrupt good manners" (1Cor.15.33; TEV is better: "Bad companions ruin good character"); (5) God knows & cares about what we do ("He sees all we do, he hears what we say, my Lord's awatchin' all the time"). (Bruce, by the by, is a publicschool classmate of Em's.)

The remaining letter-prayers are in the order they appear in the book:

Dear God, how did you know you were God? In me, that releases a hopperful of Hebrew, Greek, & Latin words I'll not let fall on you.

Dear God, who draws the lines around the countries? Yeh, yo, who! From the Balfour Declaration of 1917 through U.N.242, the Jews were promised not a state but a "homeland." Can there be a homeland without boundaries--say, for the Kurds, "Kurdistan" overlapping the boundaries of four nation-states? The white-white Canadian-U.S. boundary is no problem, but what about the brown-white Mexican-U.S. boundary? And the currently embattled boundaries of eastern Europe, of Africa, & of Asia? It's good, now, that children can see not only the political globe but also boundaryless earth from space....And who draws the lines around cultures, religions, families, management/labor, races, the sexes? And do "good fences make good neighbors," as Robt. Frost's neighbor insisted because his father believed it?

Dear God, do animals use you, or is there somebody else for them?¹

Dear God, are there any patriarchs around today?¹

Dear God, what does it mean you are a jealous God? I thought you had everything.²

Dear God, is Rev. Coe a friend of yours, or do you just know him through business?¹

Dear God, my grandfather says you were around when he was a little boy. How far back do you go?³

Dear God, I know all about where babies come from....But where are they before that?....Please answer all my questions. I always think of you.⁴

Dear God, I am Amearican.* What are you?¹ *Sic.

Dear God, thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.⁵

Dear God, please send Dennis Clark to a different camp this year.⁶

Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love...everybody in the whole world.

There are only 4 in my family and I can never do it.⁷

We read Thos. Edison made light. But in Sun. School they said you did it. So I bet he stoled your idea.⁸

"Out of the mouth of babes...."

1. Unintentionally ironic!

2. God has everything except what belongs to "idols," ie God's competitors for adoration & obedience. Well, what do the idols have that God hasn't? The God-resisting, both angels & people. Here's the humor of displacement: God is jealous of non-relationships, the child is thinking of non-posessions, in the child-world experience of visible things "mine," "yours," "his/hers/theirs."

3. A short hop from grandpa to infinite regress--the mystery of time-depth, of the beyond. And to the child, yesterday is more real than is tomorrow.

4. Dear child, the fact that you "always think of" God is the answer to "all" your "questions."....Biology? No problem. But the metaphysics of the "soul"? Big problem! Was Augustine right that the soul enters the fetus on the 60th day? And think of Arius' trouble with Athanasius for saying "There was a time when he [the Son of God] was not"!

5. Please, please, always thank God when you get something else than what you prayed for. Why? Because since life is what happens to you when you had other plans, you'd never get around to thanking God if you waited for things to turn out "right." Furthermore, who wouldn't prefer a noncompetitive, always affectionate puppy to a neonate sibling?....Then again, once in a while you are surprised by getting what you prayed for & what you planned. Then you can be super-grateful. The life-tone is the thing, as the tonic in music. The habitually grateful never become the grumbling ingrates everybody want to steer clear of.

6. What was the name of that bratty kid you just couldn't stand when you were a cute, lovable, positive-thinking kid? Now, today, anybody you just can't tolerate? Punish yourself by prayers of goodwill toward that person, & so bless yourself.

7. Honesty & theology have kissed each other!

8. Do you remember how public school & Sunday school mixed it up in your young heart? But what of the millions with no religious education? Do they think that God (ie, religion) "stoled" his ideas from scientists & inventors?