

PARENTING WITH CONFIDENCE

*Questions and Answers
About Child Rearing*



JAMES C. DOBSON, Ph.D.

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by James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

Have you noticed? Being a good parent seems to have become more difficult in recent years. It never has been all that easy, of course. For one thing, babies come into the world with no instructions and you pretty much have to assemble them on your own. They are also maddeningly complex and there are no guaranteed formulas that work in every instance. The techniques that succeed magnificently with one child can fail bewilderingly with another.

Many parents do not understand this frustrating aspect of childrearing because they have never experienced it. Through no great achievement of their own, they managed to produce a house full of “easy” children. My wife and I are acquainted with a family like that. They were blessed with three of the most perfect children you are likely to find. All three made straight A’s in school, kept their rooms perpetually clean, were musically talented, ate with one hand in their laps, were first-team athletes, spoke politely and correctly to adults, and even had teeth that didn’t need straightening! It was almost disgusting to see how well they turned out.

Predictably, our friends awarded themselves complete credit for the successes of their children. They were also inclined, at the drop of a hat, to tell you how to raise yours. Overconfidence oozed from their fingertips.

But then an interesting thing happened. The Lord, who must have a sense of humor, gift-wrapped a little tornado and sent it as a surprise package on the mother’s 40th birthday. That family has been stumbling backward ever since. Their little caboose, who is now 6 years old, is as tough as nails and twice as sharp. He loves to fight with his parents and already knows considerably more than they. Just ask him. He’ll tell you. The funny thing about his parents is that they quit giving childrearing advice shortly after his birth. Their job suddenly got tougher!

When I think of these parents today, I’m reminded of a photograph in my files of an elegantly dressed woman who is holding a cup of coffee. Her

little finger is cocked ever so daintily to the side and her face reveals utter self-assurance. Unfortunately, this woman does not yet know that her slip has collapsed around her feet. The caption reads, “Confidence is what you have before you understand the situation.” Indeed!

“If you produce enough babies, you will discover sooner or later that there is nothing simple about human beings ... of any age.”

More than one tough-minded youngster has sandblasted the confidence of his parents. That’s how he gets his kicks. If you have raised only compliant children who smiled regularly and then hustled off to do your bidding, then beware. You may not yet understand the situation. And the Lord could send you a surprise package too. Of this fact I’m certain: If you produce enough babies, you will discover sooner or later that there is nothing simple about human beings ... of any age.

Let’s take a look at a number of questions parents have asked me through the years. They range from handling a disrespectful toddler to coming to grips with a grown child who rebels against his family and God. We’ll proceed, now, with the first question, which relates to a passage of Scripture that is often misunderstood.

Q: *You have said that the children of godly parents sometime go into severe rebellion and never return to the faith they were taught. I have seen that happen to some wonderful families that loved the Lord and were committed to the church. Still, it appears contradictory to Scripture. How do you interpret Proverbs 22:6, which says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it”? Doesn’t that verse mean, as it implies, that the children of wise and dedicated Christian parents will never be lost? Doesn’t it promise that all wayward offspring will return, sooner or later to the fold?*

A: I wish Solomon’s message to us could be interpreted that confidently. I know the common understanding of the passage is to accept it as a divine guarantee, but it was not expressed in that context. Psychiatrist John White, writing in his excellent book *Parents in Pain*, has helped me

understand that the Proverbs were never intended to be absolute promises from God. Instead, they are probabilities of things which are likely to occur. Solomon, who wrote the Proverbs, was the wisest man on the earth at that time. His purpose was to convey his divinely inspired observations on the way human nature and God's universe work. A given set of circumstances can be expected to produce certain consequences. Several of these observations, including Proverbs 22:6, have been lifted out of that context and made to stand alone as promises from God. If we insist on that interpretation, then we must explain why so many other Proverbs do not inevitably prove accurate. For example:

**Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth (10:4).
(Have you ever met a diligent ... but poor ... Christian? I have.)**

The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it (10:22).

The fear of the Lord adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short (10:27). (I have watched some beautiful children die with a Christian testimony on their lips.)

No harm befalls the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble (12:21).

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed (15:22).

Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life (16:31).

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord (16:33).

A tyrannical ruler lacks judgment, but he who hates ill-gotten gain will enjoy a long life (28:16).

We can all think of exceptions to the statements above. To repeat, they appear to represent likelihoods rather than absolutes with God's personal guarantee attached. This interpretation of the Proverbs is somewhat controversial among laymen, but less so among biblical scholars. For example, the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, prepared by the faculty of

Dallas Theological Seminary, accepts the understanding I have suggested. This commentary is recognized for its intense commitment to the literal interpretation of God's Word, yet this is what the theologians wrote:

Some parents, however, have sought to follow this directive but without this result. Their children have strayed from the godly training the parents gave them. This illustrates the nature of a "proverb." A proverb is a literary device whereby a general truth is brought to bear on a specific situation. Many of the proverbs are not absolute guarantees for they express truths that are necessarily conditioned by prevailing circumstances. For example, verses 3-4, 9, 11, 16, 29 do not express promises that are always binding. Though the proverbs are generally and usually true, occasional exceptions may be noted. This may be because of the self-will or deliberate disobedience of an individual who chooses to go his own way—the way of folly instead of the way of wisdom. For that he is held responsible. It is generally true, however, that most children who are brought up in Christian homes, under the influence of godly parents who teach and live God's standards, follow that training.*

Obviously, the humanistic concept of determinism has found its way even into the interpretation of Scripture. Those who believe Proverbs 22:6 offers a guarantee of salvation for the next generation have assumed, in essence, that a child can be programmed so thoroughly as to determine his course. The assignment for them is to bring him up "in the way that he should go." But think about that for a moment. Didn't the great Creator handle Adam and Eve with infinite wisdom and love? He made no mistakes in "fathering" them. They were also harbored in a perfect environment with none of the pressures we face. They had no in-law problems, no monetary needs, no frustrating employers, no television, no pornography, no alcohol or drugs, no peer pressure and no sorrow. They had no excuses!

Nevertheless, they ignored the explicit warning from God and stumbled into sin. If it were ever possible to avoid the ensnarement of evil, it would have occurred in that sinless world. But it didn't. God in His love gave Adam and Eve a choice between good and evil and they abused it. Will He now withhold that same freedom from your children? No. Ultimately, they will decide for themselves. That time of decision is a breath-taking moment for parents, when everything they have taught appears to be on the line. But it must come for us all.

Q: *You obviously feel very strongly about this misinterpretation of Scripture. What are its implications?*

A: I am most concerned for dedicated and sincere Christian parents whose grown sons and daughters have rebelled against God and their own families. These mothers and fathers did the best they could to raise their children properly, but they lost them anyway. That situation produces enormous guilt in itself, quite apart from scriptural understandings. Then they read in the book of Proverbs that God has promised—absolutely guaranteed—the spiritual welfare of children whose parents trained them up properly. What are they to conclude, then, in light of continued rebellion and sin in the next generation? The message is inescapable! It must be their fault. They have damned their own kids by failing to keep their half of the bargain. They have sent their beloved children to hell by their parenting failures. This thought is so terrible for a sensitive believer that it could actually undermine his sanity.

I simply do not believe God intended for the “total” responsibility for sin in the next generation to fall on the backs of vulnerable parents. When we look at the entire Bible, we find no support for that extreme position. Cain’s murder of Abel was not blamed on his parents. Joseph was a godly man and his brothers were rascals, yet their father and mother (Jacob and Rachel) were not held accountable for the differences between them.

The saintly Samuel raised rebellious children, yet he was not charged with their sin. And in the New Testament, the father of the prodigal son was never accused of raising his adventuresome son improperly. The boy was apparently old enough to make his own headstrong decision, and his father did not stand in his way. This good man never repented of any wrongdoing—nor did he need to.



It is not my desire to let parents off the hook when they have been slovenly or uncommitted during their childrearing years. There is at least one biblical

example of God's wrath falling on a father who failed to discipline and train his sons. That incident is described in 1 Samuel 2:22-36, where Eli, the priest, permitted his sons to desecrate the temple. All three were sentenced to death by the Lord. Obviously, He takes our parenting tasks seriously and expects us to do likewise. But He does not intend for us to grovel in guilt for circumstances beyond our control!

Q: *My 3-year-old son can be counted on to behave like a brat whenever we are in the mall or in a restaurant. He seems to know I will not punish him there in front of other people. How should I handle this tactic?*



A: They tell me that a raccoon can usually kill a dog if he gets him in a lake or river. He will simply pull the hound underwater until he drowns. Most other animals would also prefer to do battle on the turf of their own choosing. It works that way with young children too. If they're going to pick a fight with Mom or Dad, they'd rather stage it in a public place, such as a supermarket or in the church foyer. They are smart enough to know that they are "safer" in front of other people. They will grab candy or speak in disrespectful ways which would never be attempted at home. Again, the most successful military generals are those who surprise the enemy in a terrain advantageous to their troops. Public facilities represent the "high ground" for a rambunctious preschooler.

You may be one of the parents who has fallen into this trap. Rather than having to discipline in public, you have inadvertently created "sanctuaries" where the old rules are not enforced. It is a certainty that your strong-willed son or daughter will behave offensively and disrespectfully in those neutral zones. There is something within the child that almost forces him to "test the limits" in situations where the resolve of adults is in question. Therefore, I recommend that you issue a stern warning before you enter those public arenas, making it clear that the same rules will apply. Then if he misbehaves, simply take him back to the car or around the corner and do what you would have done at home. His public behavior will improve dramatically.

Q: *The greatest power struggle in our home is schoolwork, which you mentioned, and especially homework. Our fifth-grader simply will not do it! When we force him to study, he sits and stares, doodles, gets up for water and just kills time. Furthermore, we never know for sure what his assignments are. What would you recommend?*

A: Let me offer a short discourse on school achievement, based on years of interaction with parents. I served as a teacher and I've worked as a high school counselor. Believe me, I know the agitation that mothers and fathers feel when their kids will not use the abilities God has given them. This is the situation with which they are faced: The kind of self-discipline necessary to succeed in school appears to be distributed among children on a continuum from one extreme to the other. Students at the positive end of the scale (Type I, I'll call them) are by nature rather organized individuals who care about details. They take the educational process very seriously and assume full responsibility for assignments given. They also worry about grades, or at least, they recognize their importance. To do poorly on a test would depress them for several days. They also like the challenge offered in the classroom. Parents of these children do not have to monitor their progress to keep them working. It is their way of life ... and it is consistent with their temperament.



At the other end of the continuum are the boys and girls who do not fit in well with the structure of the classroom (Type II). If their Type I siblings emerge from school cum laude, these kids graduate "Thank You, Laude!" They are sloppy, disorganized and flighty. They have a natural aversion to work and love to play. They can't wait for success and they hurry on without it. Like bacteria that gradually become immune to antibiotics, the classic underachievers become impervious to adult pressure. They withstand a storm of parental protest every few weeks and then, when no one is looking, they slip back into apathy. They don't even hear the assignments being given in school and seem not to be embarrassed when they fail to complete them. And, you can be sure, they drive their parents to distraction.

There are several important understandings about Type I and II kids that may help parents deal with their differences. First, these characteristics are not highly correlated with intelligence. By that I mean there are bright children who are at the flighty end of the scale, and there are slow-learning individuals who are highly motivated. The primary difference between them is a matter of temperament and maturity, rather than IQ.

Second, Type II kids are not inferior to Type I. Yes, it would be wonderful if every student used the talent he possessed to best advantage. But each child is a unique individual. All don't have to fit the same mold. I know education is important today, and we want our children to go as far as they can, academically. But let's keep our goals in proper perspective. It is possible that the low achiever will outperform the academic superstar in the long run. There are countless examples of that occurring in the real world (Einstein, Edison, Roosevelt, etc.). Don't write off that disorganized, apparently lazy kid as a life-long loser. He may surprise you.

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Third, you will never turn a Type II youngster into a Type I scholar by nagging, pushing, threatening and punishing. It isn't in him. If you try to squeeze him into something he's not, you will only produce aggravation for yourself and anger from the child. That effort can fill a house with conflict. I have concluded that it is simply not worth the price it extracts.

On the other hand, I certainly do not recommend that children be allowed to float through life, avoiding responsibility and wasting their opportunities. My approach to the underachiever can be summarized in these suggestions: (1) He lacks the discipline to structure his life. Help him generate it. Systematize his study hours. Look over his homework to see that it is neat and complete, etc. (2) Maintain as close contact with the school as possible. The more you and your child's teacher communicate, the better. Only then can you provide the needed structure. (3) Avoid anger in the relationship. It does not help. Those parents who become most frustrated and irritated usually believe their child's irresponsibility is a deliberate thing. Usually it is not. Approach the problem as one of temperament rather than

acts of defiance. (4) Having done what you can to help, accept what comes in return. Go with the flow and begin looking for other areas of success for your child. Let me say it once more: Not every individual can be squeezed into the same mold. There is room in this world for the creative “souls” who long to breathe free. I’ll bet some of you as parents approached life from the same direction.

Q: *How do you feel about homework being given by schools? Do you think it is a good idea? If so, how much and how often?*

A: Having written several books on discipline and being on the record as an advocate of parental authority, my answer may surprise you: I believe homework can be destructive and counterproductive if it is not handled very carefully. I am especially concerned about large quantities of homework that are given routinely during elementary school. Little kids are asked to sit for six or more hours a day doing formal classwork. Then they take that tiring bus ride home and guess what? They’re placed at a desk and told to do more assignments. For a wiry, hyperactive child or even for a fun-loving youngster, that is asking too much. Learning for them becomes an enormous bore, instead of the exciting panorama that it should be.

I remember a mother coming to see me because her son was struggling in school. “He has about five hours of homework per night,” she said. “How can I make him want to do it?” “Are you kidding?” I told his mother. “I wouldn’t do that much homework!”

Upon investigation, I found that the private school which he attended vigorously denied giving him that many assignments. Or rather, they didn’t give the other students that much work. They did expect the slower boys and girls to complete the assignments they didn’t get done in the classroom each day plus finish the homework. For the plodders like this youngster, that meant up to five hours of work nightly. There was no escape from books throughout their entire day. What a mistake!

Excessive homework during the elementary school years also has the potential of interfering with family life. In our home, we were trying to do many things with the limited time we had together. I wanted our kids to participate in church activities, have some family time and still be able to kick back and waste an hour or two.

Children need opportunities for unstructured play—swinging on the swings and throwing rocks and playing with basketballs. Yet by the time that homework was done, darkness had fallen and dinnertime had arrived. Then baths were taken and off they went to bed. Something didn't feel right about that kind of pace. That's why I negotiated with our children's teachers, agreeing that they would complete no more than one hour per night of supervised homework. It was enough!

Homework also generates a considerable amount of stress for parents. Their kids either won't do the assignments or they get tired and whine about it. Tensions build and angry words fly. I'm also convinced that child abuse occurs right at that point for some children. When Shirley was teaching the second grade, one little girl came to school with both eyes black and swollen. She said her father had beaten her because she couldn't learn

her spelling words. That is illegal now, but it wasn't then. The poor youngster will remember those beatings for a lifetime and will always think of herself as "stupid."



Then there are the parents who do the assignments for their kids just to get them over the hump. Have you ever been guilty of that illegality? Shame on you! More specifically, have you ever worked for two weeks on a fifth-grade geography project

for your nonacademic 11-year-old—and then learned later that you got a C on it?! That's the ultimate humiliation.

In short, I believe homework in elementary school should be extremely limited. It is appropriate for learning multiplication tables, spelling words and test review. It is also helpful in training kids to remember assignments, bring books home and complete them as required. But to load them down night after night with monotonous bookwork is to invite educational burnout.

In junior high classes, perhaps an hour of homework per night should be the maximum. In high school, those students who are preparing for college may handle more work. Even then, however, the load should be reasonable. Education is a vitally important part of our children's lives, but it is only one part. Balance between these competing objectives is the key word.

Q: *You've made a big deal over the issue of newborns and whether or not they come into the world with complex temperaments or as "blank slates." When all is said and done, what difference does it make? Children are children, and we take them as we find them. Why does it matter whether they began with "something" or with "nothing"?*

A: It is easy to see how you could assume that this issue is of academic interest only, with no practical application. Nothing could be further from the truth. These contrasting ways of perceiving children have far-reaching implications and will influence parenting techniques throughout the developmental years. Let me explain.

The "blank slate" theory holds that children are born neutral but with a penchant for "good." Their natural tendency is to love, give, work, cooperate and learn. The failure of the individual to behave in these positive ways does not result from any internal flaw, but rather from a corrupt and misguided society. Bad experiences are responsible for bad behavior. Therefore, it is the task of parents to provide a loving environment and then stay out of the way. Natural goodness will flow from it. As long as major mistakes are avoided, there will be no negative stimuli to distort or warp the developing individual. Rebellion and disobedience do not emanate from love. Thus, parental discipline is of lesser significance because there is no inner nature to be confronted.

"Only the Creator of children can tell us how He made them, and He has done that in Scripture."

This is the humanistic perspective on childish nature. Millions of Americans and Canadians, the majority no doubt, believe it to be true. Most psychologists have also accepted and taught it throughout the twentieth century. There is only one thing wrong with the concept: It is entirely inaccurate.

It is impossible to understand human nature without consulting the "Owner's Manual." Only the Creator of children can tell us how He made them, and He has done that in Scripture. It teaches that we are born in sin, having inherited a disobedient nature from Adam. King David said, "In sin did my mother conceive me" (Psalm 51:5, KJV), meaning that this tendency to do wrong was transmitted genetically. It has infected every person who ever lived. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans

3:23, KJV). Therefore, with or without bad experiences, a child is naturally inclined toward rebellion, selfishness, dishonesty, aggression, exploitation and greed. He does not have to be taught these behaviors. They are inevitable expressions of his humanness.

Although this perspective on man is mocked in the secular world today, abundant evidence attests to its accuracy. How else do we explain the pugnacious and perverse nature of every society on earth? Bloody warfare has been the centerpiece of world history for more than 5,000 years. People of every race and creed around the globe have tried to rape, plunder, burn, blast and kill each other century after century. Peace was merely a momentary pause when they stopped to reload! Plato said more than 2,350 years ago, “Only dead men have seen an end to war.” He was right, at least until the Prince of Peace comes.

Furthermore, in the midst of these warring nations we find a depressing incidence of murder, drug abuse, child molestation, prostitution, adultery, homosexuality and dishonesty. How do we explain this pervasive evil in a world of people who are naturally inclined toward good? Have they really drifted into these antisocial behaviors despite their inborn tendencies? If so, surely one society in all the world has been able to preserve the goodness with which children are born. Where is it? Does such a place exist? No, even though some societies are more moral than others, none reflects the harmony which might be expected from the “blank slate” theorists. Why not? Because the premise is wrong.

What, then, does this biblical understanding mean for parents? Are they to look on their babies as guilty before they have done wrong? Of course not. Children are not responsible for their sins until they reach an age of accountability—and that time frame is known best to God. On the other hand, parents would be wise to anticipate and deal with rebellious behavior when it occurs. And it will occur, probably by the 18th month or before. Anyone who has watched a toddler throw a violent temper tantrum when he doesn't get his way must be hard-pressed to explain how that particular “blank slate” got so mixed up! Did his mother or father model the tantrum for him, falling on the floor, slobbering, kicking, crying and screaming? I would hope not. Either way, the kid needs no demonstration. Rebellion comes naturally to him.

Parents can, and must, train, shape, mold, correct, guide, punish, reward, instruct, warn, teach and love their kids during the formative years. Their purpose is to control that inner nature and keep it from tyrannizing the entire family. Ultimately, however, only Jesus Christ can cleanse it and make it “wholly acceptable” to the Master.

You know what? I believe I’ve preached a sermon. And I’m not even a minister.

Q: *Generally speaking, what kind of discipline do you use with a teenager who is habitually miserable to live with?*

A: In addition to what I’ve already written on this subject, let me offer this thought: The general rule is to use action—not anger—to reach an understanding. Any time you can get teenagers to do what is necessary without becoming furious at them, you are ahead of the game. Let me provide a few examples of how this might be accomplished.



(1) In Russia, I’m told that teenagers who are convicted of using drugs are denied driver’s licenses for years. It is a very effective approach.

(2) When my daughter was a teenager, she used to slip into my bathroom and steal my razor, my shaving cream, my toothpaste or my comb. Of course, she never brought them back. Then after she had gone to school, I would discover the utensils missing. There I was with wet hair or “fuzzy” teeth, trying to locate the confiscated item in her bathroom. It was no big deal, but it was irritating at the time. Can you identify?

I asked Danae a dozen times not to do this, but to no avail. Thus, the phantom struck without warning one cold morning. I hid everything she needed to put on her “face” and then left for the office. My wife told me she had never heard such wails and moans as were uttered that day. Our daughter plunged desperately through bathroom drawers looking for her toothbrush, comb and hair dryer. The problem never resurfaced.

(3) A family living in a house with a small hot-water tank was continually frustrated by their teenager's endless showers. Screaming at him did no good. Once he was locked behind the bathroom door, he stayed in the steamy stall until the last drop of warm water had been drained. Solution? In mid-stream, Dad stopped the flow of hot water by turning a valve at the tank. Cold water suddenly poured from the nozzle. Junior popped out of the shower in seconds.

(4) A single mother couldn't get her daughter out of bed in the morning until she announced a new policy: The hot water would be shut off promptly at 6:30 a.m. The girl could either get up on time or bathe in ice water. Another mother had trouble getting her 8-year-old out of bed each morning. She then began pouring bowls of frozen marbles under the covers with him each morning. He arose quite quickly.

(5) Instead of standing in the parking lot and screaming at students who drive too fast, school officials now put huge bumps in the road that jar the teeth of those who ignore them. It does the job quite nicely.

(6) You as the parent have the car that a teenager needs, the money that he covets and the authority to grant or withhold privileges. If push comes to shove, these chips can be exchanged for commitments to live responsibly, share the work load at home and stay off little brother's back. This bargaining process works for younger kids, too. I like the "one to one" trade-off for television viewing time. It permits a child to watch one minute of television for every minute spent reading.

The possibilities are endless.

Q: *My wife and I are new Christians, and we now realize that we raised our kids by the wrong principles. They're grown now, but we continue to worry about the past and we feel great regret for our failures as parents. Is there anything we can do at this late date?*

A: Let me deal, first, with the awful guilt you are obviously carrying. There's hardly a parent alive who does not have some regrets and painful memories of failures as a mother or a father. Children are infinitely complex

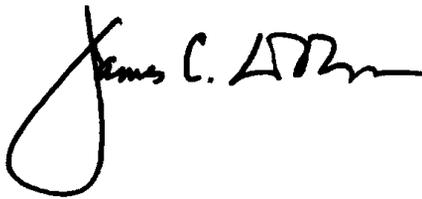
as I've indicated, and we cannot be perfect parents any more than we can be perfect human beings. The pressures of living are stressful and we get tired and irritated; we are influenced by our physical bodies and our emotions, which sometimes prevent us from saying the right things and being the model we should be. We don't always handle our children as unemotionally as we wish we had, and it's very common to look back a year or two later and see how wrong we were in the way we approached a problem.



All of us experience these failures! That's why each of us should get alone with the Creator of parents and children and say:

Lord, You know my inadequacies. You know my weaknesses, not only in parenting, but in every area of my life. I did the best I could, but it wasn't good enough. As You broke the fishes and the loaves to feed the 5,000, now take my meager effort and use it to bless my family. Make up for the things I did wrong. Satisfy the needs that I have not satisfied. Wrap Your great arms around my children, and draw them close to You. And be there when they stand at the great crossroads between right and wrong. All I can give is my best, and I've done that. Therefore, I submit to You my children and myself and the job I did as a parent. The outcome now belongs to You.

I know God will honor that prayer, even for parents whose job is finished. The Lord does not want you to suffer from guilt over events you can no longer influence. The past is the past. Let it die, never to be resurrected. Give the situation to God, once and for all time. I think you'll be surprised to learn that you're no longer alone! "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James C. Dobson". The signature is stylized, with a large loop for the letter 'J'.

*John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, eds., *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.:Victor Books, 1985), 953.

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