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Jacob and Esau and the Iconoclasm of Merit

John E. Curran: Marquette University

Abstract

This article contends that the mid-Tudor interlude *Jacob and Esau*, long known to have a Protestant slant, promotes a Calvinistic doctrine of election consonant with Edwardian theology and that in doing so it also enacts a rare kind of iconoclastic drama. The play invalidates the very discriminations between the brothers it seems to encourage us to make. This building up only to break down the differences between the elect and the reprobate proves God's judgments to be unresponsive to human merits and utterly inscrutable, even as it prompts the audience to beware of the limits of perception and the dangers of appearances.

The mid-Tudor biblical interlude *The History of Jacob and Esau*, notable for its advanced humanist structure and movement away from allegory toward realism, has given commentators much cause to disagree. Its authorship is in dispute, with Nicholas Udall and William Hunnis the most prevalent candidates,¹ as is its date of composition, which, since it might fall within either the Edwardian or Marian reign, could tell us much about the play's intended meaning.² Moreover, while the play commonly has been read as influenced by Protestant doctrines of election, scholars have been at odds as to how far and how seriously it pushes a specifically Calvinist message.³ About one thing, however, readers seem to be largely unanimous: the playwright, in rendering the story of the younger brother's crafty seizure of the elder's birthright and blessing (Gen. 25–7), goes well beyond the Bible in casting the elect Jacob as pious and innocent and the reprobate Esau as wicked and blameworthy.⁴ What I suggest here, however, is that seeing such a clear delineation between the brothers in terms of their moral goodness and their claims for our sympathy runs the danger of missing the subtlety of the

play's true theological lesson. In fact, as I hope to show, this varnishing of Jacob and tarring of Esau is only superficial, and we are invited by a number of important clues to recognize it as such. Viewing the elect as deserving and the reprobate as undeserving is a trap into which we all too easily can fall; the play, in effect, not only sets this trap for us but also prepares a way out of it in letting us see how mistaken we are to identify God's favor with human merit. By making the relative goodness of Jacob and Esau more complicated than it at first seems, the playwright promotes an essentially Calvinistic stance on predestination and its workings. In a manner underwritten by a basic Calvinism, consonant with mainstream Edwardian theology, the play illustrates the predestinarian argument that God's judgments, made before the beginning of time, are in no way dependent on human deserts and are consequently wholly inscrutable.

In this, the play also sets forth another element of Edwardian Protestantism: iconoclasm. For Michael O'Connell, the play lacks a hard-pressed didacticism and exhibits little interest in the question of the dramatic representation of sacred material. While noting its obviously Protestant sensibility, he sees the play as a throwback to the mystery cycles wherein there is little worry over the propriety of portraying the Bible dramatically—a license soon to be phased out in England by far stricter attitudes about the Bible as theater.⁵ But *Jacob and Esau* does engage the issue of iconoclasm and this not merely by self-protectively using its Calvinist doctrinal message to lend a popish medium Protestant credentials.⁶ Rather, the play parlays this message into a commentary about this medium, a commentary with a distinctly iconoclastic bent. In a manner much along the lines of Huston Diehl's model of an iconoclastic Protestant dramaturgy, *Jacob and Esau* is a spectacle that actually encourages uneasiness and self-consciousness about the act of seeing. We are led to catch ourselves in the act of relying overmuch on our own perceptions and thus to recall our ultimate dependency on "what is absent, promised, or invisible."⁷ In fact, this particular specimen, though Diehl does not mention it, realizes to an extraordinary degree the iconoclastic potential that, as she theorizes, the drama can hold and does so in a way that she does not much discuss. Here a Protestant drama stimulates our iconoclastic sensors by invoking and reinvoking a specific theological doctrine that we can apply to our experience as audience. In absorbing the doctrine, in this case regarding predestination and human merits, we are coached to scrutinize both how and what we see. In the course of constantly driving home its predestinarian theology, the play alerts us to the dangers of perception by instigating our tendency as an audience to judge the relative merits of the actions of dramatic characters and then exposing this tendency as gravely flawed. In reminding us that we are inadequate, incorrigible adjudicators of human deservings, the play sets off the pitfalls of drama itself; for we cannot trust our perceptions, and dramatic representation is bound to mislead us into trying to exercise them. *Jacob and Esau* is iconoclastic, then, because in an indirect though effective way it prompts us to realize what the characters cannot do, what we the audience cannot do, and what the drama cannot do. Thus my reading, though informed by Edwardian theology, hinges not much on whether the play belongs to Edwardian or Marian conditions and is not concerned with its possible topicality. In particular I detect little in the play of that strain, such as we find in *Lusty Luventus* and other Protestant interludes calling for a break from evil antecedents, which aligns Esau with corrupt papist conservatism.⁸ The point here is rather that we commit a papistical, even idolatrous error when we make such a discrimination about Esau, for we place far too much trust in the powers of human movements including our own faculties. After all, it is, as John Hooper said, expounding on the first commandment, a "kind of idolatry" whenever we have "confidence and trust in the power of the flesh."⁹ *Jacob and Esau* issues not so much a topical statement against popery as a Protestant warning to us to withhold our fallen judgments about human merit.

Mid-Tudor Protestantism often may have fallen short of John Calvin's explicitness in affirming that predestination was as absolute for the reprobate as it was for the elect; however, English theologians are mostly consistent with Continental influences such as Martin Bucer, Henry Bullinger, and Calvin himself in ascribing the machinery of election solely to God's preordained will and in admonishing us to refrain from questioning whether God thus unfairly was condemning the damned.¹⁰ The story of Jacob and Esau naturally became a prime

case study for the doctrine of election, Protestants having taken their cue from Paul in Romans 9:11–6. As the Geneva Bible of 1560 has it,

For yer *the children* were borne, & when they had nether done good, nor euil (that the purpose of God might remaine according to election not by workes, but by him that calleth),

It was said vnto her, The elder shal serue the yonger. As it is written, I haue loued Iacob, & haue hated Esau. What shal we say then? Is there vnrighteousnes with God? God forbid.

For he saith to Moses, I wil haue mercie on him, to whome I wil shewe mecie: and wil haue compassion on him, on whome I wil haue compassion.

So then *it is* not in him that willeth, nor in him that runeth, but in God that sheweth mercie.¹¹

In the 1539 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin explained that this mention of the brothers' disparate paths being set forth prior to their birth pointed not only to the irrelevance of their merits in God's sight but also to their merits being effectually the same: between the brothers "omnia paria" (all things were equal), yet Esau was rejected and Jacob chosen "Dei praedestinatione" (by God's predestination) even though "nullis meritis differebat" (he was distinguished by no merits). God on the basis of his will and that alone loved Jacob and hated Esau, and Paul wished to emphasize that this in no way reflected poorly on God, who is justice itself. Since Esau had badness (*malitia*) in him that Paul might have cited as an explanation for God's hatred, the apostle had other purposes in mind. Paul chose instead to stress how Esau was lost "nullo adhuc scelere inquinatus" (yet stained by no crime); God's determination in this was far above human kenning and simply not to be scrutinized.¹² Bucer, though perhaps more cautious, uses Romans 9 in much the same way: election is "the purpose and sure mercy of God from eternity before the creation of the world," whereby he assigns salvation to some of mankind "before they could do either good or evil." The Romans passage meant that "preparatory or other works have not saved those who have been saved, but grace alone" and that "the wicked remain wicked by the just judgment of God." Bucer does discuss how God's power revitalizes the free will of the elect and punishes the damned for their sin, but the central point was that God "does nothing but with perfect justice." If God ever appears unjust to us, we need to remember that "[t]here is no parallel between God's thoughts and ours." The fact is that everything falls out according to God's will, and the wicked can blame only themselves for their perdition. We resolve this apparent incongruity simply by noting that it is not for humans to sit in judgment of the divine.¹³ Bullinger in his exposition of the verses strikes a similar note: "salus nostra non a meritis nostris pendeat, sed a gratia & bonitate dei, consequens est quod nulla fit apud deum iniustitia, qui Iacobum quidem dilexit, Esauum uero odio habuit" (our salvation hangs not on our merits but on the grace and goodness of God, and hence it is that there is no injustice in God, who loved Jacob and hated Esau). It was true that while salvation is granted gratuitously, damnation is enforced "iuste & propter peccata & impietatem" (justly and on account of sins and unrighteousness). But let us inquire no further into this mystery: "fortiora te ne scrutatus fueris" (do not ponder greater things).¹⁴ The question of how a predestinating God could be innocent of human sin and damnation should not trouble us; we should be content merely to know that he was so indeed.

English Protestantism tended to echo these sentiments. Hooper claimed that Esau stubbornly had rejected grace and that God had reacted only to Esau's own decision in damning him; for Esau the way was always open, and God's justice was defensible. But Hooper's seems a minority opinion, and even he warns us that "we should not judge of election."¹⁵ William Tyndale anticipated many Edwardian theologians by averring that Paul's intention in Romans 9 was to place our salvation entirely in God's hands and to discourage us from searching "the bottomless secrets of God's predestination"; for unless you surrender your curiosity, "it shall not be possible for thee to think that God is righteous and just."¹⁶ Thereafter Thomas Becon, John Philpot, John Bradford, and James Pilkington all assumed that Romans 9 proved salvation to be utterly undeserved and God's judgments to be

utterly incomprehensible. For Becon the verses were conclusive “probations” that God’s will was motivated by itself alone and that his “certain and unchangeable” election was “free and undeserved.”¹⁷ Meanwhile in the case against the so-called “free-willers” Philpot joined Bradford and others in insisting that “all good is to be attributed only and wholly to God’s grace and mercy in Christ, without other respect of worthiness than Christ’s merits.” The free-willers in positing a divine will otherwise than “immutable” were no better than papists. In Bradford’s *Defense of Election*, Romans 9 was useful for blasting the free-willers; it was handy for teaching that “God is good, and doth good to whom it pleaseth him” and that it was futile to “dispute with God, why he would do so to those and not to the other.” Bradford conceded that, by human reason, God’s guilt for reprobation would seem to follow from God’s being solely responsible for salvation; however, we must eschew reason and “see that it is but curiosity that causeth men to travail the sweet doctrine of God’s election.”¹⁸ For his part, Pilkington seems readier than these others to admit a divine causality in the fates of both Jacob and Esau. Romans 9 clearly demonstrated that God’s judgment, made before the foundations of the world, depends not at all on the works, good or evil, he foresees in his creatures: “Noli quaerere causam antecedentem aliquam, quae voluntatem Dei ad quicquam faciendum commoveat” (do not seek some prior cause that might move God’s will to doing something). From this idea it was all too easy to slip into deeming God a tyrant. But thus we must be enjoined, “Desine humano iudicio divina consilia metiri” (stop measuring divine counsels by human judgment). The God of scripture commits by our standards a great number of unsavory acts, one of the egregious being the prenatal hatred of Esau. We must not try to deny what God reveals about himself, however it may bother us. We must keep in mind the plain truth that “Deus est: quicquid cogitat bonum est; quod facit justum est” (he is God: whatever he thinks is good; what he does is just).¹⁹

Thus the story of Jacob and Esau and Paul’s mention of it in Romans 9 showed not so much the nature of God’s justice as its inconceivability. This perspective quite consistently is adhered to in the play, including in its controversial epilogue. The prologue’s central stanza is virtually a predestinarian translation of Romans 9. We shall learn from the following dramatization that “Iacob was chosen, and Esau reprobate” not at all on the basis of any qualitative difference between them, for the determination was made before they “yet borne were / Or had eyther done good, or yll perpetrate” (lines 11, 8–9). From watching this portrayal of the brothers, then, we are to conclude nothing other than that God keeps his own counsel: “For it is not (sayth Paule) in mans renuing or will, / But in Gods mercy who choseth whome he will” (lines 13–4). Thence during the play this thesis is reinforced repeatedly, for example, by two of its prominent songs. The first song addresses God and declares, “What thou workest to the glory of thy name, / Passeth mannes reason to searche what way or how” (lines 874–5). God’s promises will be fulfilled, “But how it shall come we can no reason geue, / Saue all to be wrought according to thy will” (lines 886–7). At the finale we once again hear in song that God works through a principle of selection that lies beyond our grasp: “Howe deepe and vnsearcheable are thy iudgementes?” (line 1777). As it turns out, the dramatist, he assures us, has not illuminated the criteria used by God in loving and hating. Instead, “Whome pleaseth thee, thou doste choose or reprobate, / And no fleshe can aske thee wherfore or why” (lines 1782–3).

The epilogue follows, and it in no way overturns or disturbs this theme. The Poet steps forward and explains,

Yet not all fleshe did he then predestinate, But onely the adopted children of promise: For he forknewe that many would degenerate, And wylfully giue cause to be put from that blisse.

(lines 1801–4)

The playwright does not shift gears suddenly here and ascribe damnation to lapses into sin that God foresees in those who might have chosen heaven.²⁰ Rather, these lines simply convey the evident contradiction in God’s predestination not entailing his guilt for sin. How can God’s foreknowledge of his chosen mean his mercy in predestinating them, regardless of merits, to certain salvation, while his foreknowledge of the reprobate reflects

only their own wickedness? But this was the mere truth about God and failed to impugn his justice. As Bucer puts it, we should not shrink from saying that God had “decided in advance to abandon them to a depraved mind”; God “foreknew and ordained these very people for such a fate before he created them.” Nevertheless, “to us is to be assigned all the blame for our perdition.” Suffice it that in this God is “inscrutable, yet righteous.”²¹ God foresees and causes all things, yet humans cause their own sin and condemnation. Our playwright, in summing up his play, is saying the same thing. God foreknew the reprobate and works their ruin, even though all the reprobate indeed have degenerated from a standard of goodness and hence are inexcusable. God’s foreknowing control is all-encompassing, but still their own will-ful sin is to be designated as the cause of their exclusion from bliss. Calvin himself will soon affirm this in the 1559 *Institutes*: though Esau and other reprobates were “cut off from adoption” by their “own defect and guilt,” truly their fate only testified to “the marvelous secret of God’s grace,” for “[t]he very inequality of his grace proves that it is free.”²² So should we go back and reinterpret the play to account for Esau’s reprobation by choices he made or things about him that changed for the worse God’s opinion of him? Certainly not; as the Poet continues,

So on Gods behalfe no maner default there is, But where he chooseth, he sheweth his great mercy: And where he refuseth, he doth none iniury.

(lines 1805–7)

Esau was marked for destruction as Jacob was for salvation from before birth, but the fault remains his. How to digest this? The Poet soon tells us, and we have heard it before:

But thus farre surmounteth mans intellection, To attaine or conceiue, and much more to discusse: All must be referred to Gods election, How vnsearcheable are his wayes to mans reason.

(lines 1808–14)

Esau has caused his own fate even though he has caused nothing; we must know this, while we accept never knowing how or why.

In fact, this reiteratively calling attention to our utter inadequacy to understand God’s “*eternall decree*” (line 1788) implies the dramatist’s expectation that in the course of viewing the play we might well try to understand; through his skillful handling of the theme of discernment, he sets off the human inclination to pry into what we cannot begin to fathom. Characters who appear competent observers of others’ virtues and vices are revealed to be hopelessly blind, while the blindness of Isaac emerges as the symbol for the appropriate way for humans to approach the world. And with this distinction, what also emerges here is the principle of iconoclasm, for we hit upon Isaac’s seeing-in-not-seeing only by a breaking down of our own attraction to appearances.

As some readers begin to note, the concern with education shared by many of the Protestant interludes is present in *Jacob and Esau* only to be left behind.²³ To theorize about the formation of someone’s personality, we see, is not only fruitless for us but also wrong. In *Lusty Iuventus*, “Good Counsel” seems an allegory both of a sound Protestant education—i.e., hearing the word preached—and of the passive reception of God’s grace. The youth, mentored well by “Good Counsel” but seduced by the forces of worldliness and corrupt tradition, achieves repentance by “Good Counsel”’s return, and so we are taught not only that we must lean on God’s promises of mercy and not on our “owne desertes” but also that positive as well as negative influences do mold us. In *Jacob and Esau*, by contrast, there is not only no such nod to education but also no explanation whatever for why people turn bad and how they might turn good. Instead, we get hints of the folly of wanting any explanation. Isaac’s neighbors, Hanan and Zethar, in act I, scene ii, strive to explain what they take to be Esau’s abject depravity and decide that, at least in the case of Esau, nature trumps nurture:

Esau hath ben nought euer since he was borne. And wherof commeth this, of Education? Nay it is of his owne yll inclination.

(lines 163–5)

Since he has had the same upbringing as the gentle and unobjectionable Jacob, the answer must be Esau's innate worthlessness. But hence we must realize that the neighbors indeed are looking for answers. When Zethar proposes they waste no more breath on the matter of Esau's intractability, Hanan responds that it is only human to "lamente them that doe yll" (lines 180–6, 183). We naturally are interested in the bad dispositions of those around us, are curious about what causes them, and are saddened when they seem to be entrenched. But Zethar is right to break off their speculations, for he and Hanan presume to know mysteries. The neighbors deem Esau an irredeemable sinner simply on the basis of his hunting too loudly too early in the morning. He is monstrously inconsiderate in forcing them to stir before fully rested and to set to work before they would prefer (lines 130–6). Can we brand a person indelibly with evil from such evidence? There is truly no way to transform Esau's hunting, a neutral quality in Genesis 25:27, into a heinous crime (especially in such a hunting-obsessed upper-class culture as Tudor England),²⁴ and this leads me to believe the playwright intends no such thing. In a certain light this scene reflects much more poorly on Hanan and Zethar than it does on Esau. Their outlook is shown to be remarkably narrow and slanted as they hand down their absolutist rulings merely in response to having been inconvenienced. And it should trouble us that they see no hope for Esau; for youth unapt for godly training, "It is great meruaile and a speciall grace, / If euer they come to goodnesse all theyr life space" (lines 170–9, 178–9). But who are they to talk so of God's grace? As we learn from *Lusty Iuventus*, God's grace is fully capable of reclaiming the most apparently far-gone of youth. Hanan and Zethar dislike Esau and infer his intransigent evil from what they dislike. Moreover, from this leap they take another: his evil undoubtedly will propel Esau to an "yll ende." Thus have they made pronouncements on things invisible, simply because of their own personal reactions to what has been perceptible to them. They of course accurately predict Esau's end, but they should not make inferences and predictions based on what they see in Esau's behavior, for this suggests that his status in God's eyes and his final destination are a function of his behavior, and confers upon themselves an ability to sense something to which they are totally insensible. The second scene, then, amounts to a warning about how not to interpret the play; having been introduced to Esau in act I, scene i, and having met his obnoxiousness, we are set up to read him just as the neighbors do, and we hereby are challenged to avoid this error. This challenge recurs in act IV, scene iv, as a song featuring the refrain, "*For yong doth it pricke that wyll be a thorne*" (lines 1117–35, 1130), is followed soon by the nurse Deborah's musing that while the maid Abra is a pretty, trustworthy girl likely to make a superb wife, she may well turn out to be a shrew (lines 1150–61). We are tempted by the notion of being able to judge others from their upbringing, their tempers in youth, their reputations among peers, or their perceptible qualities and actions. But we must resist and hold appearances suspect.

Even apart from the themes of education and nature versus nurture, such nonbiblical characters contribute to the play's tempting of us. The servants constantly indulge in watching and in censuring the brothers, and it is argued constantly, if subtly, that we should not imitate them. Esau's disgruntled and flippant man Ragau opens the play inviting us into prejudice against his master, predisposing us to see Esau's obsession with hunting as an idleness that is both self-destructive and generally harmful. Esau deprives himself and everyone else of sleep, and while he neglects productive work he disrupts that of his neighbors. Esau seemingly validates Ragau's complaints, as he appears expressing a loutish heedlessness about others and even beating his harried servant. And yet Ragau has steered us toward dangerous over-simplification. To accept his point of view, we must ignore the underlying tension of how Esau's frenetic outdoor activity could constitute idleness and how it could be unquestionably inferior as an expenditure of time to Jacob's sitting in a tent with his mother. In this portrayal of Esau, he clearly wastes his own energy and Ragau's in his hunting, but it has not been unproductive. As the

biblical account predicates, Esau's adventures have yielded savory food for Isaac and hence have been appreciated greatly. Esau is haughty in his knowledge of this appreciation: "I knowe I do him please, / For he loueth me well from myne natiuitie, / And neuer so as now, for myne actiuitie" (lines 71–3). But he is nevertheless correct; his efforts have borne tangible fruit, whereas Jacob's have not. Esau is crass in his disdain for Jacob's indoor life of quietly attending their mother: "he must tarrie and sucke mothers dugge at home" (line 99). But if we put aside our prejudice for a moment it must occur to us to wonder who is really the idle one here. The Bible does not permit us to know which brother is truly better on this point, and neither does the play—though Ragau would mislead us into imagining otherwise. He is quite confident in his categorizations of people, but he ought not to be so. This is especially the case given the way his attitude is shaped principally by his own hunger. Ragau, in the tricky and witty slave tradition of Plautus and Terence, provides mirth in convicting Esau of miserliness and hypocrisy over food, and Esau's mistreatment of Ragau, starving his servant while stopping at nothing to feed himself, is indeed outrageous. But no matter how we may pity Ragau and enjoy his humor, it remains the case that his opinion is formed by his belly. His own immediate situation has prompted his judgment. Shut out of the repast in Jacob's tent, he extrapolates the hand of God at work from the way Esau has traded his birthright for a meal: "God this thyng hath wrought, / For Iacob is as good as Esau is nought" (lines 629–30). Through his own unfavorable experience with Esau he conjectures about God's favor. In the process he glosses over the fact that it is Jacob who has denied him food here and Jacob from whom he is forced to purloin it (lines 721–34). We must not share Ragau's limitedness of vision. His opening speech declares, Esau's "fashions displease moe than me, / And will haue but a madde ende one day we shall see" (lines 48–9), and so we encounter through Ragau our habit of mistaking human subjectivity for soteriological fact. His opinion about Esau's end is given no credit by others' sharing it, for his view is skewed by the deprivation he personally has suffered, and their views are skewed by shallowness. Asked by his master Isaac why he so loves Jacob above Esau, Mido confesses that he does not know why; he just prefers Jacob and wants him to supplant Esau, as does "euery body" (lines 447–52, 451). Later Mido rejoices in Esau's reversals, since "None loueth Esau," though "all good folkes are glad Iacobs parte to take" (lines 1429–43, 1441, 1442). But the truth is that Esau's unpopularity can tell us nothing substantial about him. And Mido, like Ragau, misses complexity; though disturbed at how his abetting Jacob's ruse nearly induced him to lie to Isaac (lines 1246–8), he is unmoved in his preference for Jacob. The servants' verdicts, while rendered with the utmost assurance, are quite unreliable—in regard to invisible things, ridiculously so.

In overlooking the difficulties in fairly assessing Jacob and Esau and yet persistently implying a consonance between their hard, fast assessments and those of God, the nonbiblical characters discredit themselves and throw into relief a better mode of assessment: the nonassessment figured in Isaac's blindness. The Genesis account (25:28) stipulates that Isaac loves Esau for providing him venison, while Rebecca loves Jacob. The play elaborates on this information to help build its argument. Rebecca's love of Jacob becomes here a conviction that Isaac too ought to love and to advance him because of what the younger son has "merited" by his meekness (line 264). Rebecca thinks her bias is not bias at all but discerning choice and believes her husband wrong in failing to acknowledge the privilege Jacob has earned. But Isaac is right not to follow Rebecca, who misconstrues her own love for one son as her ability to gauge accurately both sons' relative merits. Isaac makes no judgment about merits. He simply refuses to hate Esau. He can see no grounds to take it upon himself to change the arrangement they seem to have been dealt by Providence. To her insistence that he bestows his love in vain, he answers dispassionately that he "must" love Esau:

Fyrst actiue he is, as any yong man can be: And many a good morsell he bringeth home to me. Then he is myne eldest and first begotten sonne.

(lines 381–5)

He views himself as having no reason to shun Esau, whose industry has furnished him with good food, and, more importantly, as having no right to violate Esau's rights as older son. Isaac never finds fault with Jacob and never contends that Esau is any better a son or person. In his stichomythia with Rebecca (lines 381–412), he never lapses into answering her on the level of her preoccupation with "deserving" (line 390). Truly blind to what his sons might deserve, he cannot respond even to the concept. If God's promise indeed entails elevating Jacob in Esau's place, Isaac holds that this will come about without reference to the deserving of either: "I doubt not his promise made to me and my seede, / Leauing to his conueyaunce howe it shall proceede" (lines 423–4). God will direct matters in a way having nothing to do with merits; despite what may appear to be Rebecca's proactively helping Providence along, events vindicate Isaac's wisdom here. Thus his blindness, mocked and exploited by others in the play, is actually a metaphor for proper seeing. Mido is scolded by Rebecca for insensitively playing blind, experimenting with groping around in darkness (lines 316–33), but the irony is that imitating the blindness of his master is exactly what Mido and everyone else ought to be doing. Mido has begun to learn that blindness is not too terrible an infirmity, and indeed he is groping toward the way: blindness toward earthly things is a gift from God. Isaac regards his own physical blindness as something detached and impersonal, the equivalent of any sort of adversity anyone might suffer. It only exemplifies, as would any turn of fortune, good or bad, that "we ought to be thankfull what euer God doth sende, / And our selues wholly to his will to commende" (lines 293–309, 308–9). Isaac is beyond making discriminations about the world; one should indeed be in the dark as to the particulars of things in the world and "see" that the only reality is God's will and its absolute governance.

Isaac in his blindness is a symbol of, as well as a spokesman for, God's own workings. Isaac is fooled into granting Jacob what he clearly means for Esau, and he at times, in keeping with the scene in Genesis 27:21–2 when he hears a voice sounding suspiciously like Jacob's, requires proof that he truly is dealing with his older son, indicating that it does matter to him which son he blesses. But the play cultivates a sense that the sons are in fact interchangeable, the only difference being God's choice of Jacob. Here, in a departure from Genesis 27:5, Rebecca plans to take advantage of Isaac's blindness even before she overhears his agreement with Esau and formulates her scheme. She notes that "good olde Isaac is blinde, and can not see, / So that by policie he maye beguiled bee" (lines 897–8). Apparently Isaac is already quite susceptible to mistaking his sons, and so his sending Esau out hunting is merely the occasion that happens to arise for him to be confused. There is a standing possibility that Isaac will fail to distinguish between his sons, and this brings up the idea of their being conflated easily—certainly more easily than we might think. We see that the lines of demarcation between the brothers are ripe to be blurred. And we see further that this Isaac has a basic inability to function as a respecter of persons, which is of course reminiscent of God's inability. This symbolism is consolidated after the trick has succeeded. In the phrasing of the 1560 Geneva Bible, upon discovering the trick when Esau returns in the wake of the disguised Jacob, Isaac "was stricken with a meruelous great feare" (Genesis 27:33). But in the play Isaac is nothing so dismayed. The blow is softened here, as Isaac's realization comes from a comic moment with Mido rather than from a shocked confrontation with Esau, and Isaac expresses a lack of surprise at being deceived, recalling that he thought he heard Jacob's voice (lines 1393–1400). Clearly it seems that the father is rooting for neither son, and in his confronting Esau four scenes later, such equanimity flows naturally into the play's predestinarian message, which Isaac articulates straightforwardly. He informs Esau that while "An other to thy blessing was predestinate" and that while thus it was lost by irrevocable "necessitie," still "Thine owne fault it is that thou art dispossessed" (lines 1490, 1509, 1530). As with the common interpretation outlined above, Esau must be blamed for God's rejection of him even though it has nothing to do with his or Jacob's merits and even though it comes of an immutable decree. Once again Isaac falls into stichomythia, and once again he talks solely of what is and never about anyone's desert. As Esau demands to know how all his hunting can go unrewarded, Isaac shoots back that what's done is done (lines 1507–8). Isaac leads us into the scene with what is, truly, the only precept we need: "O Lorde my God, how deepe and vnsercheable / Are all thy iudgements, and how immutable?" (lines 1471–2). In seeing the utter opacity of God's judgments and in

never issuing any judgments of his own, Isaac is perspicacious in his blindness and those around him are myopic.

This myopia certainly extends to Rebecca, as is evident with the temper of her plotting to place her beloved Jacob in Esau's seat. In what seems quite an original move, the playwright makes a distinction between the rightness of her planning to snatch the birthright and blessing by fraud and the wrongness of her attitude in it. The disguise trick, Naomi Pasachoff argues, typically was read in Protestant exegesis as a sinful act of usurpation of divine prerogative. Indeed, very soon the 1560 Geneva Bible marginalia will proclaim, "This subtiltie is blameworthy because she shulde haue taried til God had performed his promes" (Genesis 27:9b). But the play has no accusation to make of this kind. We get no impression, as Pasachoff observes, other than that the deceptions stem from the sincere submission of the deceivers to what they know is the will of God.²⁵ Rebecca here is operating from profound respect for God's governance, and we get no sign that Jacob spiritually has compromised himself in being convinced to share her certainty about what God wants. The playwright stresses here the biblical fact that God revealed the future ascendancy of Jacob exclusively to Rebecca (Genesis 25:23). In the play she is not guilty of trying to rush Providence, for she has had access to the divine will in a way no one else has. In her first scene Rebecca refers to her awareness of uniquely having been instructed by God: "I knowe this voyce came not to me of nothing," and so "by me I doubt not to worke he doth intende" (lines 232, 237). God has clearly "appoynted" Jacob to supplant Esau, and thus she knows he has also "appoynted" the means by which this will happen (lines 251–3). When she then tries to persuade her husband voluntarily to disinherit Esau, she mentions the many times she told Isaac of the divine voice she heard while pregnant, her belief in which is "certaine." Familiar though she has made Isaac with the prophecy, it is clear that her understanding of the future God has set down greatly surpasses his (lines 415–22). It is as one to whom God has spoken directly and as one to whom he has imparted a surety of her being his instrument that she hatches her scheme, one, as she says, compelled "to bring to passe that I know god wil haue wrought" (line 900). The play squelches any sense that she merely might be superimposing her own self-serving holy fictions onto Machiavellian tactics. We constantly are reminded, as in her various prayers (lines 273–6, 980–5, 1050–1, 1100–3, 1341–6, 1402–10), that she, like no one else, has been enlightened as to God's purposes. In this play the problem lies not in the fact of her having employed deceptions, for in doing so she follows what is preordained, the process as well as the outcome.

The problem lies instead in her belief that Jacob must be installed in Esau's place because of what each *deserves*. Her appeal to Isaac to renounce Esau is contaminated with personal feelings, as she tries absurdly to paint Esau in the blackest, Jacob in the brightest of colors based on the conduct of each. Esau hunts beyond reason and is generally aggravating, while Jacob's quiet contemplation is a seemingly form of piety; for this should their father take the hugely drastic measure of inverting their birth order? This attempt to locate an essential difference between the brothers based on the differences in how they comport themselves falls flat, Isaac perceives, not only because the differences fail to warrant such radical action but also because the attempt is driven by Rebecca's irrational discriminating: "O wife, I perceiue ye speake of affection, / To Iacob ye beare loue, and to his brother none" (lines 365–6). She admits that she simply despises Esau and even wishes she had never borne him (lines 367–80). Her biases have led her to exaggerate mightily the gaps in merit between her sons and thence to entangle these imagined gaps with God's election: Jacob is "worthy" and so should replace Esau, whom "the Lorde doth hate" (lines 392, 410). Isaac asks her to explain why she is so repulsed by Esau, as much her son as his; she replies, "verily I know, / God will set vp Iacob, and Esau downe throwe" (lines 415–6). Her antipathy toward her elder son derives from her special knowledge of God's design. This moment catches her in circular reasoning—Esau should be disinherited because he is unlikable to her, and he is unlikable to her because he is going to be disinherited—which in turn points to the lack of any such reasoning on God's part. This muddling of who is more likable with whom God has elected suggests the vast disparity between divine and

human judgment. God does not tie his judgment to anyone's likeability. Later she tells Jacob, "haue no dout, but thou art sure elected, / And that vnthrift Esau of God reiected" (lines 891–2). In the same breath she both appropriately remarks on God's undoubted judgment and inappropriately connects it to human qualities such as unthriftiness. Toward the end, when Esau bitterly and poignantly indicts her for her gross imbalance in maternal love, Rebecca has no answer for him (lines 1722–36). Undone and enraged, he says powerfully,

I meruail why ye should so loue him, and me not?Ye groned as well for the one as thother I wotte.But Iacob must be aduanced in any wyse.

(lines 1729–31)

She responds merely by charging Esau not to harm a brother, thus invoking for Jacob's safety the very bonds of natural kinship she herself conspicuously has been transgressing. As her inability to answer Esau's (justified) indictment shows, events have proven her wrong. The much higher merits of Jacob are an illusion of hers, and they cannot account for what has happened. What Isaac foresaw has come to pass: God works it all out by his own "conueyaunce" for reasons entirely his own. Rebecca rightly recognizes her role as God's tool but wrongly posits a why and wherefore for God's election, misguidedly aligning her own human inclinations with the cause behind the divine plan (line 424).

The play not only gives us many chances to see reflected in the characters our proclivity toward trying to gauge others' merits but also directly confronts us with it as we watch Jacob and Esau. The nonbiblical characters and Rebecca serve to draw us in to joining them in their vain judgments, and they are all too likely to succeed as we regard for ourselves the two brothers. Diverted by the verse, the humor, and the spectacle and conditioned to prejudice by much of what we hear and see, we are, as an audience of these renditions of Jacob and Esau, apt to be swayed by the notion of their deserving their respective fates. The blindness of Isaac is in any scenario difficult to achieve and all the more so as we meet with such a theatrical display as this one. But if we investigate the ways in which the play courts our prejudices only to invalidate them, we find that surrendering to the veneer of the display stamps us with an insidious kind of idolatry. The play tempts us into believing that Jacob is appreciably better than Esau, that we are astute enough to see this distinction, and that it has some bearing on destiny. If we are to avoid an idolatrous overattachment to surfaces, we must channel our iconoclastic energies to shake off any sense we may have that a superior virtue has won Jacob his election and any inordinate revulsion we may have toward Esau.

For his part, Jacob evinces an acquiescence to God's will that is clearly meant to be commendable, particularly to a Protestant audience. When Rebecca first broaches the subject of his unseating Esau, Jacob's reservations arise from his feeling that "we must be content wyth Gods ordinaunce" (line 211). He sees it as repugnant to both morality and practicality to "wish agaynst Gods wyll" (lines 216–7). All things must be "referred to his vnserched iudgement," he says, since "I am his owne vessell his will with me to do" (lines 221, 223). Our first encounter with Jacob, then, has him espousing the play's overarching lesson, the lesson of Romans 9:20–1: "But, ô man, who art thou which pleadest against God? Shal the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? / Hathe not the potter power of the claie to make of the same lompe one vessel to honour, and another vnto dishonour?" Jacob understands that he is nothing other than what God makes him according to God's own unsearchable determinations, and it is this very understanding that allows him to put his reservations aside. His concerns about offending God and defrauding his brother are allayed by his mother's secure assurance that God would have it so. After gaining the birthright from Esau in exchange for a meal, Jacob is aware that actions manifestly unethical are made righteous when we undertake them as God's agents for God's workings and undertake them in a spirit of obedience:

Thou knowest my heart Lord, I did it for no ill.And what euer shall please thee to worke or to do,Thou shalt finde me prest and obedient therto.

(lines 840–2)

Soon this obedience will take the form of disguising himself as Esau, a much more serious case of fraud, for it involves not only using Esau's own profligacy against him but also lying outright to Isaac. But because of his certainty in his mother's certainty (lines 1227–8), donning the disguise expresses both Jacob's knowledge of the absoluteness of the divine control and his submission to that control. Rebecca enjoins Jacob, "play thy parte well, and sticke vnto it throughout" (line 1014). Jacob's carrying through with what David Bevington calls the "distasteful business" of this histrionic performance is akin to his compliantly persevering in the role God has scripted out for his life.²⁶ Dressing as Esau displeases Jacob for its being embarrassing as well as sneaky, as he feels silly and uncomfortable to "weare an other birdes feathers" (lines 1283–8, 1287). But he must bend his will to play out the part God assigned him: "It shall become me to shewe mine obedience, / And to thy promise O Lorde, to giue due credence" (lines 1229–30). The greatest strike against Jacob, then, is made in this play to speak well of him. His complicity in the intrigue is actually an exercise of piety in a distinctly predestinarian vein.

And yet, all at the same time, this version of piety is in no way meritorious and in fact undermines the very idea of merit. Willingness to yield to his role in the divine plan despite its unpleasantness is the sum total of Jacob's virtue; except for this, and this alone, there is nothing to like about him. Some readers have found Jacob difficult to warm to,²⁷ and I propose that this is because the playwright deliberately has made him so. Of those elements of the biblical story of Jacob that might help dignify him, such as his vision of heaven or his tribulations under Laban, we get not a trace here. Instead, his duplicity is even worse than what the Bible calls for: rather than from serendipity, his purchasing of the birthright comes from a preconceived plot to dupe Esau, and, as we noted above, Rebecca has them readying to manipulate Isaac's blindness well before her eavesdropping alerts her to the opportunity afforded by Esau's hunting expedition. Had it not been directed by heaven, then, the trickery would come across as fairly rotten, and, outside of agreeing to and executing the trickery, the character gets a rather minimalist treatment. Considered for himself and not his skullduggery against Esau, this Jacob is neutral at best. He is meek, but his meekness engenders no noteworthy generosity or self-abnegation. Nor is he allowed by any means to improve his image after snatching the blessing; in the play's penultimate scene he quickly is dispatched to seek sanctuary with Laban and is heard from no more. Nothing about Jacob compensates for the ugliness of his deceptions except our confidence in his feeling that God has arranged for him to go through with them. Thus Jacob's character in the play, good only in subjecting himself to be bad in order to serve God, has two salient things to tell us about God's election. First, because Jacob's actions on God's behalf are truly impossible to applaud or even to approve by human standards, we see the inapplicability of human standards to God's ways. That his sole admirable quality is his subjection to God's will reminds us that admirable qualities do not matter in the face of God's will. Second, Jacob is outstanding only in his submission, and so we see that submissiveness to God is the only sensible way to react to the world, the only way to approach the world realistically. Here the only virtue is acknowledging God's control, which substantiates the completeness of that control and its insusceptibility to being moved by human efforts. Jacob is the brother bound to win out and that is all and everything we need know about him. To the extent we try to read more into it, to clothe Jacob with greater significance, we have allowed the play's superficialities to fool us as surely as Jacob's masks have fooled others.

The play does more to vilify Esau than it does to lionize Jacob, but that only means we as iconoclasts must work all the harder in Esau's case not to think in terms of merits and deserts. With a wonderfully delicate touch, the playwright supplements the Bible to enhance Esau's odiousness and at the same time intertwines features that at least partially redeem him. In keeping with the prevailing Protestant theology, this Esau is blamable for his reprobation, but he is also doomed by God's immutable and inexplicable predestination. It is clear that God hates him and that God is just, but it is also vague why God hates him, for he has not, if examined objectively, earned such a hatred. The play must balance both of these sides and manages to do so despite seeming to

foster a wholly negative impression of Esau. We already have noted how Esau's compulsive hunting is used to alienate him from other characters and mark him as wicked, even while it cannot serve convincingly in this office: the hunting is bad, and yet it is not that bad; it has some good aspects to it and certainly fails to explain how God would choose to make him a vessel of dishonor.

This dynamic holds for the two episodes in which Esau falls into and responds to the deceptions. His sale of his birthright for a mere bowl of food is not only rash and shortsighted but also a sign of his having all the wrong priorities: "So Esau contemned his birthright," declares Genesis (25:34). The play shores up this sense of Esau's unconscionable disrespect not only by having him beforehand drive himself to the point of cannibalism, bully poor Ragau, and badmouth Jacob, his only hope for relief, as a "hoeson hypocrite" (line 543) but also by portraying him afterward as utterly unrepentant for the ill bargain he has made. "It were sinne not to sell ones soule for such gear," says Esau stupidly (line 749). With Ragau's chiding and Esau's stubborn imperviousness to it, the play fleshes out the Bible's implication that to give away one's future inheritance for the immediate needs of the present is pure thoughtlessness, both imprudent and ungrateful. Simultaneously, however, there is more to Esau here. His disdain for the birthright is not total, as he anticipates that a father's love will lead Isaac to reinstate him (lines 809–10). And the disdain itself comes along with a kind of resolve that does him some credit. If he has indeed lost his birthright, he will meet his fate with aplomb and find a way to survive. In fact, he will survive by his bravery: "This falchion and I will haue part to our lot" (line 816). Not the lowliest way to deal with loss, this, and it harks forward to the curse Isaac will give him in lieu of the blessing, that Esau will be forced to live by his sword (line 1526, Genesis 27:40). We consider here what his fate will be as a result of Jacob's chicanery, a grim fate he will nevertheless meet courageously (line 1625). Thus foreshadowed here, the second episode, the blessing lost by the disguise trick, similarly renders an Esau both hateful and not so hateful. His activeness as ever is that of a wastrel, and so in using his absence as a chance for the disguise trick, Jacob and his accomplices can appear merely to profit from Esau's enormities. And yet, the play devotes so much detail to the painstaking preparation of the false food, meant to stand in for the venison Isaac expects from Esau's hunt, that it must occur to us how much Isaac values the fruits of Esau's labors. We must wonder if Esau is in effect victimized by his best quality, his urge to please his father. Esau's desire for the blessing, which has motivated his most zealous hunting at Isaac's behest, is earnest but tainted with dreams of lording it over others (lines 1456–60), and when he hears it has been irretrievably stolen by Jacob, Esau's rage is both brutal and demeaning. Attacking the servants throws his suffering into the realm of comedy and reduces it to the level of a mere tantrum. But Esau's decision to forgive Jacob is handled so as to maximize its positive force. The time it takes him to reach it is collapsed from the biblical time scheme,²⁸ a device that has the effects of attenuating the biblical Esau's faults, such as his poor marriage choices, here only alluded to in passing (lines 1670–2), and of making his magnanimity appear all the more extraordinary. Esau was commonly read as an example of insincerity and ineffective repentance,²⁹ but in the play's finale he is if not truly repentant—a state reserved for the elect—then genuinely and compliantly bent on reconciliation. His parents congratulate him: "Sonne Esau, thou haste thy selfe well acquitted" (line 1761). Indeed, we must concur, for he has in fact imbibed the play's predestinarian message: one must submit to unchangeable and inexplicable necessity. Says Isaac, "It was the Lordes pleasure that it should thus be, / Against whose ordinance to stande is not for thee" (lines 1763–4). Esau gently consents, standing ready to follow whatever his parents command (line 1770). Esau, though deservedly a reprobate, has done nothing to deserve reprobation, and the best way to comprehend this paradox is to concede that we comprehend not at all. The play leaves us with this conclusion by letting it seem to dawn on Esau himself.

What I have tried to demonstrate, then, is that this play that we know to be a sophisticated experiment in Protestant biblical drama has even greater sophistication to it than readers have heretofore appreciated. *Jacob and Esau* has a definitive theological edge, as it dramatizes a story of crucial import to predestinarian Protestantism in a manner that bears out the assumptions of that persuasion. And yet the play also has a

statement to make about dramatizations. By decorating the story and affording us evidence well beyond the Bible to aid our assessment of Jacob and Esau, the play seems to encourage us to assess them. But what the play ultimately proves is that such an impulse, while natural, can nevertheless be harmful to us. We must check ourselves from judging whether someone deserves salvation, for thereby we falsely imagine that God adjusts his judgment to what people do and that it functions on a principle imaginable to us. If we do check ourselves, we have gleaned far more from the play than an example for predestinarian theology. We have gained a rare opportunity as iconoclasts, striving to break off from our consciousness any thoughts of God's workings other than that they are utterly mysterious. My surmise is that in working as an iconoclastic drama in this way, *Jacob and Esau* is indeed rare, a case unusual or even unique in the extent of its conformity to Diehl's model; this rarity might be tied to the failure of Protestant religious drama to persuade Tudor authorities of its viability—perhaps too few plays managed to operate in an iconoclastic vein, and then it was soon too late. But perhaps there are all sorts of plays urging in all sorts of ways our awareness of the dangers of spectacle, and we need only to uncover how they do so. I hope some future study will be able either to locate such currents of iconoclasm in other dramas or account for this play's singularity.

Footnotes

1. For Nicholas Udall's authorship, see Lily B. Campbell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press; Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1959), p. 215; Murray Roston, *Biblical Drama in England: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 76–8; Helen Thomas, "Jacob and Esau—'rigidly Calvinistic'?" *SEL* 9, 2 (Spring 1969): 199–213, 200, 211–3; John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 301–5; and Greg Walker, *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), p. 166. See also *Jacob and Esau*, ed. John Crow and F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Printed for the Malone Society by Charles Batley at the Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. vi. All references to the play are from this edition and cited parenthetically by line number only (no acts or scenes), though I have also consulted *The History of Jacob and Esau*, in *Reformation Biblical Drama: An Old-spelling Critical Edition*, ed. Paul Whitfield White, *Renaissance Imagination: Important Literary and Theatrical Texts from the Late Middle Ages through the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 69–133. For William Hunnis's authorship, see C. C. Stopes, *William Hunnis and the Revels of the Chapel Royal* (Vaduz: Kraus, 1963), pp. 265–70, 331–4; Naomi E. Pasachoff, *Playwrights, Preachers, and Politicians: A Study of Four Tudor Old Testament Dramas*, *Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies* 45 (Salzburg: Institut Für Englische Sprache und Literatur Universität Salzburg, 1975), pp. 18–56; and White, *Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 118–9. My judgment inclines me to Hunnis, but on little beyond intuition.
2. For King Edward VI, see Stopes, p. 269; David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), p. 109; and King, pp. 301–5. For Queen Mary, see Campbell, p. 215; Pasachoff, pp. 18–56; Thomas, pp. 211–3; and White, *Theatre and Reformation*, pp. 118–9. The sole extant edition of the play was printed in 1568.
3. For the play's commitment to Calvinism, see G. Scheurweghs, "The Date of *The History of Jacob and Esau*," *ES* 15, 6 (December 1933): 218–9; Campbell, pp. 214–5; Bevington, pp. 109–10; Roston, pp. 76–8; Ruth H. Blackburn, *Biblical Drama under the Tudors*, *Studies in English Literature* 65 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 148–9; and Dalia Ben-Tsur, "Early Ramifications of Theatrical Iconoclasm: The Conversion of Catholic Biblical Plays into Protestant Drama," *PartialA* 3, 1 (January 2005): 43–56, 52–4. For a qualified Calvinism or a non-Calvinist tone, see King, pp. 301–3; Stopes, p. 267; Thomas, pp. 199–213; and White, *Theatre and Reformation*, pp. 121–3, 186–8.

4. Campbell, pp. 213–5; Bevington, pp. 110–3; Roston, pp. 76–8; Thomas, pp. 201–2; Blackburn, pp. 149–52; Pasachoff, pp. 30–1, 35–6; King, pp. 301–3; White, *Theatre and Reformation*, pp. 121–2; Michael O’Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early Modern England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 103–4; and Ben-Tsur, pp. 53–4.
5. O’Connell, pp. 103–7. For an argument that this and other Protestant plays that have a serious didactic purpose are, like their medieval forebears, unconcerned with the problem of idolatry, see Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), pp. 102–6.
6. See Ben-Tsur, pp. 50–4. For an argument that Protestant biblical plays are designed to “correct” the idolatry of the mystery-play tradition, see Clifford Davidson, “‘The Devil’s Guts’: Allegations of Superstition and Fraud in Religious Drama and Art During the Reformation,” in *Iconoclasm vs. Art and Drama*, ed. Davidson and Ann Eljenholm Nichols, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 11 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1989), pp. 92–144, 104–6.
7. Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 13, 9–39, 63–6. Diehl’s thesis seems anticipated, perhaps, by the remarks on Protestant epistemology of King, pp. 144–60, 273.
8. See Bevington, pp. 110–3; Roston, pp. 76–8; Pasachoff, pp. 16–56; White, *Theatre and Reformation*, pp. 122–3. Admittedly, at the time this was a recognized way to treat the story. For the resemblance of Esau to Catholicism, see James Pilkington, *Exposition on the Prophet Obadiah (1562)*, in *The Works of James Pilkington, B. D., Lord Bishop of Durham*, ed. James Scholefield (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1842), pp. 211, 219, 223–4, 248, 255–6, 260–2. For a moment exemplifying the attack on traditionalist Catholic authority, see R. Wever, *Lusty Juventus*, ed. J. M. Nosworthy and G. R. Proudfoot, Malone Society Reprints (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), lines 237–40.
9. John Hooper, A Declaration of the Ten Holy Commandments of Almighty God, in *Early Writings of John Hooper, D. D. Lord Bishop of Gloucester and Worcester, Martyr, 1555*, ed. Samuel Carr (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1843), p. 309.
10. For the Continental influences on Edwardian theology, in which John Calvin shared prominence with Henry Bullinger and Martin Bucer, see Charles Davis Cremeans, *The Reception of Calvinistic Thought in England*, Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences 31.1 (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1949), pp. 32–5; A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2d edn. (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 225–6; Carl R. Trueman, *Luther’s Legacy: Salvation and the English Reformers, 1525–56* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 287–92; Diarmaid MacCullough, *The Boy King: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 173–4; and Peter Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480–1642* (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 71–2.
11. Romans 9:11–6, from *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1969).
12. John Calvin, “Text and Indices,” vol. 1 of *Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin 1539: Text and Concordance*, ed. Richard F. Wevers, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids MI: The Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin College and Seminary, 1988), pp. 219–21, 219. The translations are mine, but I have consulted Jean Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 936–47. For the possible influence of the 1539 *Institutes* on *Jacob and Esau*, see Scheurweghs, pp. 218–9 and White, *Theatre and Reformation*, pp. 186–8.
13. Bucer, *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, trans. and ed. D. F. Wright, Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 4 (Appleford, England: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), pp. 114–6. Also pertinent is the following from

Bucer's *Commentary on Romans*: "of his own will alone . . . without any regard for present or future merits God assigns some to his flock to be saved and others to the offscouring of the wicked to be destroyed"; nevertheless "no one is lost except by his own merit" (*Common Places*, p. 153).

14. Henry Bullinger, In *Omnia Apostolicas Epistolas* (Thurgau, 1537), pp. 79–83. For a corroborating passage see Bullinger, *The Fourth Decade*, in *The Decades of Henry Bullinger: Minister of the Church of Zurich The Fourth Decade*, ed. Thomas Harding, trans H. I. (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1851), pp. 4185–9.

15. Hooper, *Declaration*, pp. 259–61, 264. For Hooper's antipredestinarianism see Trueman, pp. 205–42. Hugh Latimer seems wary of denying free will but emphasizes that "we need not go about to trouble ourselves with curious questions of the predestination of God" (*Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer: Sometime Bishop of Worcester, Martyr, 1555*, ed. George Elwes Corrie [Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1865], pp. 204–7, 175). For passages against merits, however, see Latimer, *Sermons and Remains*, pp. 74, 125, 140–1, 146–8 and Latimer, *Sermons by Hugh Latimer: Sometime Bishop of Worcester, Martyr, 1555*, ed. Corrie (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1864) p. 521.

16. William Tyndale, "Prologue upon the Epistle to the Romans," in *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures. By William Tyndale, Martyr, 1536*, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1848), p. 505.

17. Thomas Becon, *The Catechism*, in *The Catechism of Thomas Becon, S. T. P. Chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer, Prebendary of Canterbury, &c. with Other Pieces Written by Him in the Reign of King Edward the Sixth*, ed. Rev. John Ayre (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1844), p. 45; Becon, *The Common-places of the Holy Scripture*, in *Prayers and other Pieces of Thomas Becon, S. T. P., Chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer, Prebendary of Canterbury, &c.*, ed. Ayre (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1844), pp. 316–7.

18. John Bradford, *The Writings of John Bradford, M. A., Fellow of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, and Prebendary of St. Paul's, Martyr, 1555*, 2 vols., ed. Aubrey Townsend (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1848), 6:128–31, 169–71, 5:316, 322, 325–6. For some indication of John Philpot's sense of the passage see his translation *Defence of the True and Old Authority of Christ's Church by Coelius Secundus Curio*, in *The Examinations and Writings of John Philpot, B. C. L., Archdeacon of Winchester: Martyr, 1555*, ed. Robert Eden (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1842), pp. 339–40. For Bradford's theology, see Trueman, pp. 243–88. For the Edwardians' reaction against radical groups including the free-willers, see Catharine Davies, "The Threat of Religious Radicalism," in *A Religion of the Word: The Defence of the Reformation in the Reign of Edward VI* (Manchester and New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 67–86.

19. Pilkington, "Tractatus de Praedestinatione," pp. 674, 677, 676.

20. See Thomas, pp. 201–8 and King, pp. 301–3. For a reading somewhat similar to my own see White, *Theatre and Reformation*, p. 188. White makes use of Bradford, "A Treatise of Election and Free Will," 1:211–9.

21. Bucer, *Common Places*, pp. 97–8.

22. Jean Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes*, trans. Battles, p. 929.

23. On the theme of education in the mid-Tudor Protestant drama, see King, pp. 280–1 and White, *Theatre and Reformation*, pp. 112–8. On *Jacob and Esau* going well beyond this theme, see Bevington, p. 110; Blackburn, p. 149; and White, *Theatre and Reformation*, p. 117–8.

24. For readings that assume the playwright's attempt to make Esau's hunting a sin, see Campbell, pp. 213–4; Bevington, p. 111; Roston, pp. 76–8; Thomas, p. 200; and King, pp. 301–3. For Edward VI's own affinity for hunting, see MacCulloch, pp. 21–2.

25. Pasachoff, pp. 23–33. I do not, however, share Pasachoff's conclusion that Rebecca is meant as a model of the doctrine of active resistance to corrupt authority. To me, she is not a model at all; the play's character is geared to stress the unique connection to God of the biblical personage. For a fuller development of Pasachoff's argument, see Michelle Karen Ephraim, "Jewish Matriarchs and the Staging of Elizabeth I in *The History of Jacob and Esau*," *SEL* 43, 2 (Spring 2003): 301–21.

26. See Bevington, pp. 112–3, 112. Bevington's reading has influenced mine here. See also Campbell, p. 214.

27. See the especially strong reaction of Blackburn, pp. 149–52.

28. On the playwright's changes to the Genesis story see Bevington, pp. 112–3; Blackburn, p. 149; and Pasachoff, pp. 30–1.

29. See for example Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Battles, 620–1; and Becon, *Catechism*, pp. 11–2. Interestingly, Becon finds no goodness in Esau's forgiveness, for it was forced upon him against his will by God (p. 15); the incident spoke merely to God's protection of Jacob not to Esau's goodness. See also Hooper, "Expositions of Psalms XXIII., LXII., LXXIII, and LXXVII," in *Later Writings of Bishop Hooper Together with His Letters and Other Pieces*, ed. Charles Nevinson (Cambridge: Printed by Cambridge Univ. Press for the Parker Society, 1852), p. 272; Latimer, *Sermons*, p. 479.