

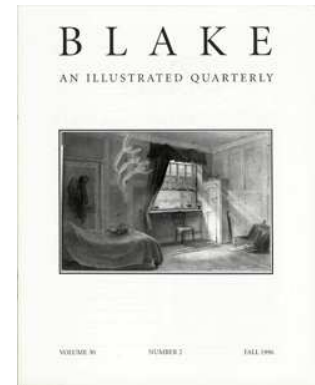
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The Death of Blake's Partner James Parker

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

The Death of Blake's Partner James Parker

BY G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

James Parker was a good friend to William Blake all his life; the two men served their apprenticeships together, they were arrested together on a sailing expedition about 1780, they were in partnership in 1784-85 and lived over the shop in Broad Street together, and in the last years of Parker's life Blake was still consulting him about professional matters.¹ However, very little is known of Parker's domestic circumstances except that he was married to Ann Serjeantson in the same month that Blake was married to Catherine Boucher, in August 1782, and that he died suddenly on 16 May 1805.

A significant amount of information about James Parker's life may be derived from his Will² which has recently been noticed in the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, London. This indicates that Parker's sister Sarah Parker kept house for him 1787 to 1805 and implies that his wife was dead by then. Perhaps the break-up of the Blake-Parker printshop was related to the ill-health and death of Ann Serjeantson Parker.

The Will was made in somewhat curious circumstances. Apparently Parker discovered suddenly in April 1805 that he had a disease which was likely to prove quickly fatal, and he made his will somewhat casually and perhaps hastily, writing in pencil, omitting the date beyond "April 1805," and neglecting to have it witnessed, though he did show it to his sister Sarah in the presence of this apprentice Richard Golding, who was then about 20. Though Parker lived another month, he made no effort to give the Will a more official cast, and when the Will came to be proved, a good

¹ See "The Journeyman and the Genius: James Parker and His Partner William Blake with a List of Parker's Engravings," *Studies in Bibliography* 59 (1996): 208-23. Parker's Will was discovered just as this essay was going through the press but too late to be included in it.

² PROB 11 14333, 342-43, transcribed from the Public Record Office microfilm of the original. At the end of a page, there is often a duplication of one or more words with the beginning of the next page, though the to-be-repeated words at the foot of the page are not dropped, as in ordinary catch-words. This duplication is ignored in the transcription above.

Wills were probably rather unusual among Parker's class; at any rate, no Will has been traced for Blake's father James Blake (d. 1784), his mother Catherine Blake (d. 1792), for his brother James Blake (d. 1827), for the poet himself (d. 1827) or his wife Catherine (d. 1831), for Henry Fuseli (d. 1825), for John Flaxman (d. 1826), or for Thomas Stothard (d. 1834), though Thomas Armitage, the first husband of the poet's mother, did leave a will (1746), as did Blake's patron Thomas Butts (1845).

deal of testimony was required from Sarah Parker, from Richard Golding, and from the servant Ann Pickering to demonstrate its authenticity.

According to the Will, which was made in April 1805 and proved six months later on 6 November,

In the Name of God Amen. I James Parker of Spring Place Ken[tish]. Town in the parish of Pancras and County of Middlesex Engraver being in perfect health and in full possession of the faculties it has pleased God to bless me with do make and write with my own hand this my last will and Testament in the following Manner[:] I give and bequeath my household Goods Prints Debts Mortgages to my dear Sister Sarah whose unremitted Care Love and Attention I have received through Life[.] I also devise give and bequeath to my said Sister my freehold Cottage and Land on the west Side of Highgate Hill in the said County late in the occupation of M.^{rs} Mary Rust[.] I also give and bequeath to my said Sister my freehold property in Little Drury Lane and occupied by M.^r Astly and Williamson and my Will Intention and Devise is that my Sister Sarah may enjoy through her Life the Profits of my before-mentioned freehold and copyhold Estates without the Let or hindrance of any person whatever but that after her decease they shall be equally divided between the children of my late Sister Mary late the wife of Thomas Nixon now or late of Betterwell in the County of Leicester Carpenters and Joiners and finally I institute and appoint my said Sister Sarah the sole Executrix of this my last Will and Testament made and written in perfect health and with my own hand and also signed by me the [space] day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five James Parker.

On 5 July 1805 it was proved by:

Sarah Parker of Spring Place Kentish Town in the County of Middlesex Spinster Ann Pickering Servant of the same place Spinster and Richard Golding of Saint Bartholomews Hospital London Engraver . . . Sarah Parker . . . is the natural and lawful Sister and only next of kin of James Parker . . . who departed this Life on the sixteenth Day of May now last past a Batchelor without a parent leaving her the deponent and also Ann Nixon Lavinia Nixon and Mary Nixon Spinsters his lawful heirs by a Second Sister the only persons intitled in the distribution of his personal Estate . . . and this deponent saith that she lived and resided with her said Brother for upward of eighteen years before and to the time of his death and managed his household Concerns and that on Tuesday Morning [14 May] preceding his Death he the said deceased produced and read to this deponent in his Garden the paper writing now hereto annexed written in pencil and bearing date the [blank] Day of April one thousand eight hundred and five and which paper he then declared to be his will and she further saith that on the Morning of the day of the deceaseds death but

previous thereto she this Deponent on looking in her deceased's Brothers pocket found the said will therein and saith that the said paper is now in the same plight and condition as when read by the deceased to her the Deponent as aforesaid And the said Ann Pickering Servant for herself saith that she knew and was well acquainted with the said James Parker for upwards of nine years before and up to the Time of his death which happened on Thursday the sixteenth day of May now last past and that during all that time the said Sarah Parker Spinster his Sister resided with him and this deponent saith that the said deceased did not tell his Bod[?] of the Illness whereof he died until the afternoon of the day preceding his death and saith that on the Morning of Thursday the day on which the said deceased told the deponent that he was verily sensible he was dying and begged[?] deponent not to weep that she the deponent thereupon asked him if he had settled his affairs to which he replied "I have made my will my Sister is every Thing to me[?]" or he then expressed himself in words precisely to that Effect and was then of perfect sound Mind and Capacity And this deponent Richard Golding for himself saith that he knew and was well acquainted with the said James Parker for upwards of Eight Months before and up to the Time of his Death living both with him the said James Parker during that period as a pupil in the Business of an Engraver And this deponent saith that he the said deceased was in the constant habit of using his Black Lead pencil for almost every Purpose even to the Keeping of his Accounts and this Deponent saith that on the Morning of Tuesday the fourteenth Day of May he saw the said deceased in his Garden with his Sister Sarah Parker and he this said deceased was then reading a paper to his said Sister and adjourned therewith into the Summer House and this deponent further saith that on the Morning of Thursday being the day on which the deceased died But before his death the said Sarah Parker showed the deponent the Will of the said deceased now hereunto annexed bearing date the [blank] day of April one thousand eight hundred and five and which had the appearance of being and which was as he verily believes the very paper he so saw the said deceased reading to his said Sister and which paper she the said Sarah Parker then informed the said deponent she had taken out of the [said deceased's del] [word illeg] Brothers pocket and this deponent Ann Pickering Servant and Richard Golding jointly and severally say and depone that they have several times seen the said deceased write and also [word illeg] his name and particularly so with his pencil and having now carefully viewed and perused the paper writing hereunto annexed purporting to be and contain the last Will and Testament of the said deceased beginning thus "In the Name of God Amen I James Parker of Spring Place" and ending thus "and with my own hand and also sealed by me the [blank] day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five" and has subscribed "James Parker" and being written in pencil they the sd[?] Deponents do say they verily and in their Consciences

believe the whole Body Series[?] and Contents thereof to be all of the proper hand writing and Subscription of the said James Parker deceased / Sarah Parker Hse[?] Servant Richard Golding The same day the said Sarah Parker Spinster Ann Pickering Servant Spinster and Richard Golding were duly sworn to the Truth of this affidavit before me S Parson Surrogate pros.¹ Geo: Bogg Not. Pub.

This Will was proved at London on the nineteenth Day of November in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and five before the worshipful [three names illeg] Doctor of Laws Surrogate of the Right Honourable Sir William Eyres Knight Doctor of Laws Master [word illeg] Commissary of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury lawfully instituted by the oath of Sarah Parker Spinster the Sister of the Deceased and his sole Executrix named in the Said Will to whom administration of all and singular the Goods Chattels and Credits of the deceased was granted she having before first sworn duly to administer.

The Will demonstrates that James Parker was a man of some substance (unlike his sometime partner William Blake), with two rental properties plus his house in Spring Place, Kentish Town, with a Summer House. He apparently had no wife or children surviving, his married sister Mary Nixon was dead, and his only relatives were his spinster sister Sarah Parker and his nieces Ann, Lavinia, and Mary Nixon. And he was sufficiently prosperous to have a servant, Ann Pickering, who was with him for nine years. (William and Catherine Blake had a servant when they lived in Lambeth but soon gave her up.)

Notice, however, that among his "household Goods Prints Debts Mortgages" specified in the Will there is no reference to a rolling press. William Blake certainly had a rolling press on which he printed his own engravings, and it has been supposed that he acquired it by the time that he and Parker set up their print-selling business in 1784.³ Blake was apparently unusual in owning his own rolling press.

Parker's Numerous Assemblage of Prints, together with his Coins and Medals, were sold at auction by Thomas Dodd on 18 February 1807.

It is likely that Blake visited Parker and his sister Sarah at their home in Spring Place, Kentish Town, and it is pleasant to think that Blake may have accompanied the Governors of the society of Engravers to the grave in St Clement Danes⁴ when James Parker was buried.

James Parker's Will throws a good deal of domestic light upon a man who was very important in the life of William Blake.

³ *Blake Records* (1969) 29.

⁴ Obituary of James Parker in *The Gentleman's Magazine* 75 (June 1805) 586.

William Blake, Jacob Ilive, and the Book of Jasher

BY MORTON D. PALEY

William Blake was, as we know, very interested in research on and speculation about the Bible, including matters such as Hebrew prosody, theories of composition, and the constitution of texts.¹ He was also, aware of the tradition that there were lost books of the Bible as is shown in plate 12 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*;² as well as by his eagerness to illustrate the Book of Enoch after its publication in 1821.³ In Swedenborg's *True Christian Religion*, Blake would have read that one of these, the Book of Jasher, was extant "amongst the People who live in Great Tartary."⁴ Blake did not, of course, respond to ideas on such subjects as a scholar but rather as a poet and artist, placing himself in relation to new knowledge by assimilating it. The fact that a work purporting to be the lost book of Jasher (or Jashar) had been published in his own century must have been known to him, especially as it had been produced by a man well known in the printing profession, one whose heterodox religious ideas had some common ground with his own. The fact that this work was widely considered a forgery would hardly have deterred Blake, whose characteristic view was that not the literal fact of production but the inner meaning of a work determines its authenticity. As he wrote in his annotations to Bishop Watson's *Apology for the Bible*, "I cannot concieve the Divinity of the <books in the> Bible to consist either in who they were written by or at what time or in the historical evidence which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another but in the Sentiments & Examples which whether true or Parabolic are Equally useful . . ." (E 618). In the 1751 *Book of Jasher* Blake may well have found useful sentiments and examples, as well as a model for the layout of part of his own Bible of Hell, *The [First] Book of Urizen*.

The Book of Jasher is considered a lost source for parts of other books in which it is named, including Joshua 10-

¹ See Leslie Tannenbaum, *Biblical Tradition in Blake's Early Prophecies* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) 25-54; Morton D. Paley, *The Continuing City* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1983) 45-48; and Jerome J. McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 152-72.

² *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 39, hereafter cited as *E* followed by the page number.

³ See Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1981) 1: 595.

⁴ See my "A New Heaven Is Begun": Blake and Swedenborgianism," *Blake* 13 (1979): 80.