DETAILS

Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Online

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Authorship

I Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

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1. General

The category of the "author" of a text is heavily discussed in 20th-century literary theory. To a certain extent, the intellectual movements of literary theory correspond to those of biblical studies. While the "author" and his intentions attracted considerable attention in literary and biblical interpretation in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, this shifted in the 1950s and 1960s with the ascent of new currents like work-immanent interpretation, reception theory, semiotics, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and post-colonialism (e.g., Staiger 1955; Eco 1962; Barthes 1977 [1968]; Foucault 1969; White 1995; the contributions in *Semeia* 75 [1996]; cf. the collection of essays Jannidis et al. 2000; Utzschneider 1996; 1999). As a result of these approaches, the notion of "authorship" was (in part) abandoned, but in current scholarship, influenced by New Historicism and other developments, it is being reconsidered and refined (Jannidis et al. 1999). For biblical studies the distinction between the "real" and the "implied author" is of crucial importance because biblical books often privilege their "implied author" over against their "real author(s):" Isaiah, e.g., is "Isaianic" only to a minor extent in a historical sense, nevertheless, it is "Isaianic" as a whole from a literary perspective.

These biblical findings are far from exceptional in their ancient contexts. The concept of an "author" in the sense of an original creator and intellectual proprietor of a certain artifact stems from 15th-century humanism but is unfamiliar to earlier periods. In the ancient Near East, including ancient Israel, books were not produced by what might be termed in modern times as an "author," but rather resulted out of a complex transmission process which often involved oral stages of a text's genesis prior to its scribal fixation and an often multistage transmission (see e.g., Tigay 1982; Pearce 1993; Carr 2005). The technical procedures of writing down a text were taken care of by scribes. The contents of what they wrote – the ideas and the topics – were mainly traditional (Oppenheim 1964: 13). However, the activity of the scribes was not limited to just copying texts: they also reworked them in a way which partly corresponds to what modern authors would do. They not only handed down their texts, but they updated, expanded and explained them in order to preserve not only the letter of the text, but also its meaning. But the scribe's bonds to tradition were so strong that they had no reason to identify themselves from behind their texts.

2. Ancient Near East and Egypt

Most of the ancient Near Eastern literature has been shaped by generations of scribes and scholars and does not bear the names of its authors (Hallo 1991; Hurowitz 1997; Carr 2005). When a text is referred to, then, it is by its *incipit*, i.e., the first line, not by its author. The identity of some tablets' scribes is sometimes discernible in tablets with colophons (Hunger 1968). The colophons are, however, mostly interested in the fact that the respective tablet has been copied properly and accurately and not in the personality of the scribe (Veldhuis 2003: 22).

In the Mesopotamian literature of the 1st millennium BCE there are some explicit cases of "constructed" authorship. The so-called *Catalogue of Texts and Authors* ascribes the authorship of certain famous works to named scribes of the past and even to gods (Ea), and in some other texts, contemporaneous scribes profess descent from these mythical ancestors (Lambert 1957; 1962). The closing paragraph of the *Erra Epic* names the composer of the epic, Kabit-Ilani-Marduk, and claims divine inspiration for his scribal activity (Veldhuis 2003: 20).

A similar case is attested by the Egyptian Ramesside Papyrus Chester Beatty IV, listing the name of eight famous (partly historical and partly legendary) wisdom literature authors of the past (Derchain 1996; Shupak 2001; cf. Assmann 1985). But these findings do not speak against the traditional character of ancient Mesopotamian and

ancient Egyptian literature. Rather, they support it: If a text deals with its "authorship," then it is constructed as a literary device, not as a historically reality.

3. Hebrew Bible and Pseudepigrapha

The findings in the HB/OT, to a large extent, mirror those in its cultural surroundings: its books are anonymous or (at least partly) pseudonymous. Biblical literature is traditional, not authorial (for the current discussion on biblical "authors" and/or "redactors" cf. Kratz 1997; Ska 2005; Van Seters 2006). The earliest book in early Jewish literature whose author is known by name is the deuterocanonical book of Jesus ben Sirach (ca. 175 BCE; Schniedewind 2004: 7–11). The information on its author's name is, however, only deducible from the later preface that the grandson of Jesus ben Sirach attached to the book two generations later when he translated his grandfather's book into Greek.

Nevertheless, there are a number of cases in the HB/OT where "authorship" is encountered as a literary device which seems, to a certain extent, comparable to the above-mentioned findings in ancient Near Eastern literature. Thereby, most of the biblical ascriptions of texts to certain persons strive to denote the intellectual "authorities" behind the tradition they represent, rather than to develop the idea of an original writer.

The text of the Torah neither claims to be authored nor to be written down by Moses. Only Deuteronomy presents itself as a Mosaic discourse (Deut 1:1–5), and there are several mentions of minor scribal activities by Moses in the Torah (cf. Exod 17:14; 24: 4; 34:27–28; Num 33:2), but the Torah, in its entirety, is an anonymous piece of tradition. However, in other passages of the HB/OT the Torah can be termed as "(the book of) Moses' Torah" (e.g., Josh 8:30–31.; 23:6; 2 Kgs 14:6; 23:35; Mal 3:22; Dan 9:11, 13; Ezra 7 :6; Neh 8:1) and thus be ascribed to Moses. It is not compelling that these texts have Mosaic authorship in view. Only later postbiblical receptions understood these references in this way and initiated a broad tradition developing the notion of Moses as scribe and author (Najman 2003).

The *prophetic books* are introduced by superscriptions which present their content as words of a certain prophet (Jer 1:1; Amos 1:1) or as word of God that came to a prophet (Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1; Hag 1:1; Zech 1:1; Mal 1:1) or as a prophet's vision (Isa 1:1; Ezek 1:1; Obad 1; Nah 1:1; Hab 1:1). Again, these titles do not denote the historical authors of the relevant books, but they primarily construe the prophets as "authors" of their books, or more appropriately, as "authorities" of their books. Jeremiah in its present shape apparently is aware of the fact that it does not just contain "the words of Jeremiah" (Jer 1:1) in terms of historical authorship: Jer 36:32 points out that similar words, now included in the book, "were added" to the words of Jeremiah already existing at the time of the scenery of ch. 36. Thereby, the passive formulation of that statement (*nôsap*) seems to have also non-Jeremiahnic words in mind. However, these secondary portions of the book update its content for a later period in the mood of "Jeremiah" (Steck 2000); therefore, they still adequately can be termed "words of Jeremiah."

Psalms – in Qumran still regarded as "prophecy" (11QPsª XXVII, 11) – is formally comparable with the prophetic books in terms of its partial "Davidic" provenience. 2 Sam 22:1 (cf. Ps 18) as well as several superscriptions (*lĕdāwīd* "of David"?/"concerning David"? [Kleer 1996]; cf. also the "colophon" Ps 72:20) in Psalms ascribe some of the psalms to David, again not necessarily in terms of – even fictitious – "real authorship." This "Davidic" concept is later substantiated and heavily expanded by Sir 47:1–11 and 11QPsª XXVII, 2–11 where David appears to be the composer of many more songs and poems than are now preserved in Psalms. The Bible also attests to a Solomonic corpus of writings as Proverbs, Songs of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. Apparently these ascriptions to David and Solomon provide a specific realm of royal, cultic and sapiental "authority" for "their" books.

This biblical concept of arguing for "authority" by constructing a specific, illustrious "authorship," attested in all parts of the HB/OT canon (Ulrich 2003), reached its heyday in Hellenism, when a mass of early Jewish literature was produced that ascribed itself to the great ancestors of the biblical tradition who either were prominent for their reported scribal activities (Baruch, Ezra, Moses) or were famous forefathers of the mythical past (Enoch, Noah, Abraham). These so-called "Pseudepigrapha" (Chazon/Stone 1999) include texts like *2 Baruch*, *4 Ezra*, *Ascension of Moses*, *1–3 Enoch* and *Noah*, *Apocalypse of Abraham* and others. Their notion of "authorship" is insofar adequate (Smith 1972; Najman 2003), as these books often are shaped by thorough exegesis of the relevant biblical source texts.

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II Greco-Roman Antiquity and New Testament

Pieter Botha

Authorship in Greco-Roman times (practiced within pre-print technology) was a collective and participatory activity without the social and judicial institution of copyright. Writing and reading are culturally embedded phenomena, as any other social convention, therefore the historical context of ancient text production must be taken into account.

1. Greco-Roman Authorship

Although they are mostly indirect and surprisingly difficult to interpret, there are a few reports about the work methods of ancient writers (e.g., Pliny, *Ep*. 3.5; Quintilian, *Inst*. 1. praefatio 7–8; Lucian, *Quomodo hist*. *conscrib*. 47–48; Marcellinus, *Vita Thucydidis* 47e; Plutarch, *Tranq. an.* 464e–65a; Galen, *In Hippocratis epidemiarum I commentarium* 1.36).

A general pattern can be summarized as follows: Writing a book in antiquity began with a *lector*/ἀναγνώστης reading a source book(s) to the author. Typically, the reader was a slave trained to read (Nepos, *Atticus* 14.1) who often assumed the role that the author may claim for himself as *recitator* of his own works (Pliny, *Ep*. 9.34; Suetonius, *Claud*. 41.2). The places that seemed important for the preparation of his work were marked (*adnotare*). Collaborating with (an) assistant(s) the author created excerpts and dictated them to a stenographer, who transferred them onto *pugillares* (notebooks consisting of plates made from wood), or onto a scroll. From these a text was dictated for writing onto papyrus scrolls (later into a codex).

Various supplementary notes, and linguistic or stylistic improvements found their place either on the margins and on the empty places of the recto or on the verso, but these insertions and additions were often not made by the author himself, but instead were written down by a scribe or the professional διορθωτής (corrector).

Final versions were distinguished from provisional, intermediate versions, though the difference often concerned form rather than content. Later phases could be avoided, or became an alternative (and not just an edited version) to the first. An author could organize the initial versions of his work by compiling an unstructured conception or a detailed set of notes (ὑπόμνημα), either one of which was transferred into the final version (σύγγραμμα or σύνταγμα). Other words used for the preparatory stages of writing are ἐξήγησις, succinct explanation, παρασκευή, preparatory draft, or ὑποτύπωσις, sketch.

Provisionary drafts could circulate for review or comments and could even reappear under another name. From these the final version or fair copy of the text (which was called either ὑπόμνημα or σύνταγμα) was prepared which usually preceded the actual publication (ἔκδοσις).

Dictation determined all aspects of authoring, not just the compilation of the work but also when composing subsequent versions, including the production of copies for distribution. Dorandi refers to some indications that poets possibly preferred writing themselves, while the prose writers commonly used a system of dictation. Research and reflection were by means of recitation and listening; composition by means of dictation.

Dictation facilitates an experience of writing as a public performance, irrespective of the circumstances of the recording session and even absence of an audience.

a. Patronage

The relationship between author, written language and "reader/reading public" is not at all self-evident, especially where the concept of personal authorship has little association with property and individual, introspective identity. Books were often published without the name of the author or under another person's name.

A discussion of possible author-functions of texts from the Roman period will need to investigate how the emergence of the Principate affected the relationship between literature and politics, specifically the various positions of an author within the Roman state with its increasingly monarchist structures.

Publication would be initiated by a dedication. The use of dedications in Hellenistic and Roman literature is related to the patron-client system so characteristic of Greco-Roman times.

The dedication of a literary work is the naming of a person with the intent of expressing an honor or gratitude to this person by association with the writing. Modern practice places the dedication as part of the so-called paratext (that is, on the title page, or on book covers, or in prefaces), but Greek and Latin dedications preserved from antiquity are part of the actual work. The basic form of the dedication is an address at the opening of the text or at some convenient point in the main part of the text.

As the production of any work *required* a group effort, this wider circle of readers, assistants and secretaries determined the product and its dissemination. Together with the pervasive presence of patrons, loyalties profoundly determined the process and products of authoring.

b. Authorial Information

Works from antiquity do show authorial awareness: the preface (προοίμιον/*prooemium*) or prologue/*praefatio* was essentially the means by which authors introduced themselves, but the authentication attached to the main text (σφραγίς) could also have this function. Literary prefaces could be written in the form of a letter.

A neglected aspect of interpreting ancient texts with regard to author-functions is how to understand the role of (apparent) biographical information for the interpretation of texts. A number of indications make it clear that Greco-Roman scholars/exegetes believed that the βίος of an author should be studied and known before one starts with an author's writings (Mansfeld: *passim*). Despite this emphasis, the concept of an artistic oeuvre as an entity was unknown in antiquity. A publication was not perceived as the *conclusion* of a productive process and other "authors" had few scruples interfering with an author's work. Interpolations or even (false) attributions of other works to an author were common.

The role of such biographical "information" was not historical as we would understand it. Often the biographical information was designed to provide prescriptive implications for the reader.

In general, the reading of texts by Greco-Roman scholars of antiquity did not function as an impersonal activity mediating among co-equal individuals through rational, deliberative procedures. Rather, the meaningful claims resulting from readings depended on the "trust" placed in a given author, as a function of his social status, which in turn had much to do with his protectors or with a perception of his representation of ancient wisdom.

c. The Living Voice

The Greco-Roman experience of writing as oral-aural and performative is well-known. The practice of reading aloud while others listened added distinct elements to the social functions of authoring.

A text and its elements (e.g., the implied author) was meant to become a living voice. The author of a text, even when writing in one's own hand, was always surrounded by the sounds of accompanying voices, whether researching, composing, dictating or editing. Authoring was a manifestation of the *living voice*.

2. New Testament

Authorship/author as category of interpretation is a central concept in New Testament scholarship: in the way single-figure studies dominate criticism; in the organization of texts in "editions"; in biographical studies; and above all, in the idea of "style," of a writing marked uniquely and characteristically, a style expressing a person's "mind" or "psyche" whose essential identity scrawls across a page and declares its supposed "ownership" of self-revealing and self-constituting discourse. Remarkably little attention is given to specifying as to how authorship should be conceptualized and understood historically.

Pseudonymity and anonymity are the dominant problems in much of New Testament discussions of authorship, typically with an effort to justify the phenomenon in early Christian literature: to conceal the name of the author due to controversial (politically dangerous) contents or character of the work; that the audience considers the identity of the author as self-evident (naming is redundant); or that the idea of individual authorship is simply unthinkable, as the text represents contents (traditions) owned by the community – in such communities originality is to be avoided.

Emphasizing that authoring was not a "free-standing" activity, Malina (75–76) situates writing in a setting of common client relations under the control of a politically central personage with whom one might have fictive kin ties. Authorship functioned, generally speaking, in "agency-extended" forms of control. Earliest Christianity is located in such a personal "control" setting, as, though the technology of writing expands memory techniques, written documents were read aloud. "The authority of the document depends on the authority of the reader … Sacred documents were to be read and interpreted by personal representatives of the deity" (Malina: 82–83).

Later Christianity, part of the evolving Roman Empire, required the possibility of storing and transmitting information across time and space in a way that stretched the capacities of personal or word-of-mouth memory so that writing became an embodied medium of extension (Malina: 85). Authorship of New Testament documents was "historicized" to provide continuity and to stabilize the varied forms of centrally administered agency.

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III Islam

Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila

In Islamic literature, authorship may be discussed on three levels: the authorship of the Qurʾān, of the Ḥadīth and related genres, and of general literature.

The Qurʾān is not, in a strict sense, an authored book but, according to the majority of Sunnī theologians, the uncreated Word of God and his eternal attribute. Thus, God cannot be properly considered its author. Islamic theology also strictly denies that Muḥammad was the author of the Qurʾān or could have had any role in its composition, except that of a mediator of revelation. Among the terms used for the transmission of the Qurʾān from God to humankind are *tanzīl* or *inzāl*, "sending down," and *waḥy*, "revelation," never "composing," "writing" or "authoring." However, the organization of the verses and sūras and the compilation of the Qurʾān are ascribed to human agents working under divine guidance, but these cannot be described as authors or even redactors from an Islamic point of view. They merely collected dispersed material and put

it between covers (*bayna 'l-daffatayn*).

The Ḥadīths, reports of the authoritative words and deeds of the prophet Muḥammad, were collected and codified in the early centuries of Islam. These collections are of various types, some being arranged according to subject matter, others according to transmitters or other criteria. An essential feature of these compilations is the *isnād*, the chain of witnesses and oral transmitters, whose authority should guarantee the reliability of the transmission and, hence, the authenticity of the words attributed to Muḥammad.

On the one hand, these works have a clearly identifiable author, the compiler, yet, on the other hand, he is not responsible for the matter itself or even its verbal form, for he merely codifies, selects and organizes pre-existing materials. A prime example of this kind of work would be the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 870 CE), where only a very small percentage of the text is actually composed by the author, and the rest consists of lists of transmitters (*isnāds*), followed by the actual body (*matn*) of the reports containing the words and deeds of the Prophet as narrated by eyewitnesses. The use of *isnāds* continued to be an important feature in Islamic literature, which is largely compilatory in character. A new book often consists of existing materials which are merely in a new form. This may either be an enlargement with commentary and additional materials, an abbreviation in a more concise form, or a reorganization according to new criteria. The author is restricted to the role of compiler.

From the beginning, there were also less strict compilations where the *isnād* was partly dispensed with and various versions could be combined into one continuous narrative. Here the role of the author is more prominent as he selects the phrases and expressions from his sources and often has to rewrite passages to make the narration proceed smoothly. Yet he is not alone in his writing and has to keep rather closely to the original reports. The *Sīra*, the Life of the Prophet, by Ibn Hishām (d. 833 CE) contains ample examples of this amalgamatory procedure.

From religious literature, the use of existing materials vouchsafed by an *isnād* spread to some extent into other genres, so that in lexicography, history and even anecdotal *adab* literature, the device of *isnād* is to various degrees used. In non-religious literature the use of *isnāds* is less systematic than in religious literature, but it, too, shares the compilatory character of religious literature. Thus, for example, many historical works consist of short transmitted narratives with a limited amount of additional material composed by the author. As most stories purport to be originally eyewitness reports, the real inventor, or author, of a story very often remains unknown, although sometimes he may be equated with the first or last narrator given in the *isnād*, but there is always room for speculation. Thus, many interesting pieces of short prose remain anonymous, only the name of the compiler being known, not that of the person to whom we owe the original formulation of the story. The same goes for the various versions of a story in different compilations. A comparison between the different versions often shows how crucial the role of the redactor has been.

In poetry, scientific literature and, for example, geographical literature and travelogues, the concept of authorship comes closer to what is understood by the term in modern literature, namely the creative use of writing to convey either fictitious or real events or facts. In these genres, the personality of the author is clearly definable. The concept of the poet as an individual author already existed in pre-Islamic poetry despite its oral nature. The highly personal poems were transmitted under their authors' names, not as anonymous folk poetry.

The dependence on *isnād* brought with it a certain devaluation of creative authorship, although writing learned and religious books was a most respectable profession. Instead of emphasizing their originality, most authors minimized their own authorial role and posed as faithful transmitters of inherited wisdom. Even in secular prose literature, dependence on, and loyalty to, sources was valued more than inventiveness. Openly fictitious literature is rare and exceptional in the pre-modern Near East. The main task of an author was conceived as to organize the material and put it into an elegant form.

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IV Literature

; T. Boer

The term "authorship" usually conjures up the following: an autonomous and biographical individual intentionally produces an authentic work (usually but not exclusively written). This author gives the work its meaning and, at times, its authority. Each element – autonomy, biography, intention, authenticity, meaning and authority – derives from and is influenced by the various images of authorship in the Bible. Here we face a paradox: the idea of the author in the Bible is inseparable from its reception. In the Bible the author is usually the creation of the Bible's editors. For example, "Isaiah" is the name of an edited collection as it is of some reputed "author" of those sayings. So we can add another term: editor.

In order to trace how these elements influence ideas of authorship subsequent to the Bible, let us consider them in terms of four overlapping historical eras: antiquity, the medieval era, modernism and postmodernism. What happens is that in each period one way of characterizing authorship comes to the fore, and the others move to the side to play a minor role. Further, while each view of authorship seems new, it turns out to have close connections with the Bible; the new perspective brings these connections to light.

1. Antiquity

Antiquity covers the period from the writing and editing of the HB (4th cent. BCE), through the NT to Augustine (354–430 CE). Three terms were used during this period. In Hebrew the closest word is *sopher*, usually translated as scribe. In Greek the word is γραφεύς, which is closer to "writer." However, as Latin became the *lingua franca*, the terms *scriptor* and *auctor* began to be used. While *scriptor* is more strictly a writer, *auctor* became the preferred term. Its close connection with *auctoritas*, authority, is no accident: the author is one who bears authority. But authorship also takes on all manner of connotations with creative power, comparable to the gods themselves. The biblical "authors," such as Moses, Isaiah, the gospel writers and Paul, became authoritative, like Homer, Plato or Virgil. If they were not quite gods, they bore divine creative authority. Authority is a circular idea: it is attributed to earlier writers by later editors and communities, yet these authors then seem to internalize such authority and then exude it as though it were intrinsic. What happens then is that if one wishes to have a work considered as authoritative, one tries to write in the name of Moses (*The Testament of Moses*), Paul (the Pseudo-Paulines), or any other ancient, authoritative figure. Or, if one had authority passed down from these authors, particularly by the church, then one wrote like them. For example, Clement wrote his epistles like Paul, or Tertullian and Chrysostom wrote their treatises on the borrowed authority of apostolic succession.

2. Medieval Period

During the medieval period – from Augustine's time (the gradual breakdown of the Roman Empire) through to the Reformation and Enlightenment of the 16th and 17th centuries – the authority of the author must face the rise of new ideas that have their roots in the Bible. During this period we find the following contradictory situation: the

author becomes an (auto-)biographical figure through Augustine's influence; this biographical figure is but a mouthpiece for God, with whom authority rests; the author's meaning is hidden and one searches for it by means of allegory. These themes may be found in biblical representations of authors, but with a new twist. Augustine's *Confessions* highlighted the biographical individual, who now told a story about his life on the way to God. Yet, this figure both searches for God and transmits God's message. One after another of the medieval writers were caught in this bind, all the way from Augustine, through Boethius to Aquinas. The reason for this bind lay with God: the author sought to speak God's word clearly, and yet God remained hidden. Allegory became a dominant way to deal with this tension: allegory recognizes that the ultimate author is God, and yet his true meaning lies hidden. In order to find this hidden meaning, one follows the allegorical path.

3. Modern Period

In the modern period – from the time of the Reformation to the Second World War – the features of authorship shift again. God's role becomes ambiguous and less important, for the role of the autonomous, individual author in the production of meaning becomes central. The key to meaning lies in the author's intention first and then its meaning today: the famous distinction between what the author meant and what the text means, as K. Stendahl put it. Not only is the individual able to read the Bible for him- or herself, as Luther and then Calvin asserted (although by no means practiced), but the search is on for the real intention of Jesus' sayings, Paul's letters, or Jeremiah's prophecies. Biblical historical criticism was the great exemplar of this assumption. Embedded in the Bible, the full logic of this model actually frees the author from God and so all manner of secular authors flourish: private, intentional individuals like Shakespeare or Vincent van Gogh who produce poetry, novels, pieces of art, intellectual works and so on.

4. Postmodern Era

The postmodern era dates roughly from the Second World War until our own day. During this period, the idea of the author as an autonomous individual whose intention is the key to meaning starts to fray. Under the influence of the pre-war New Criticism, authorship becomes problematic, with autonomy, authenticity, authority and intention all under question. T. S. Eliot's refusal to say anything concerning what he intended is a signal moment of this development. Problematic also are the ideas of coherent plot structure and uniform meaning, as the novels by T. Pynchon or the films by Q. Tarantino show all too well. In light of these developments, the anonymous and pseudonymous author comes the fore – one who has always been there in the biblical texts. If the author as an identifiable individual disappears, he or she now becomes a construction, produced by the text itself. Ezekiel is unknown outside the text and is really its product, as is Moses or Jesus or John. We have yet to see where such a view of the author will lead us, especially since so many hang onto the image with which I began. Yet it does seem that, perhaps apart from Paul, all of the texts in the Bible are anonymous. It is as though the concrete author has been effaced, only to be reborn as an entity by the text. But is that not how authorship has always been in some sense?

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See also

‣ Anonymity

‣ Corruption of Scripture

‣ Narrative Criticism, Narratology

‣ Pseudepigraphy

‣ Pseudonymity