Bart D. Ehrman provides a useful description of the goals and methods of the socio-historical approach applied to the biblical texts—in this case, the Gospel of John.¹ In his opinion, “[t]he theory behind the method can be stated simply: the social history of a community will affect the way it preserves its traditions.” For instance, even if they are going to explain the same passage of Scripture, different preachers will deliver different kinds of sermons to different churches around the globe because each preacher will try to relate the biblical text and its message to the life of his or her own community. Accordingly, it would be possible to reconstruct, at least to some extent, the social context of an unknown congregation on the basis of such a sermon. Our knowledge of contemporary Christendom—as Ehrman seems to suggest—should enable us to distinguish, for example, a sermon pronounced “in a black church in Soweto, South Africa, in the 1980s, when apartheid was official policy,” from an homily given “in a white upper-class church in suburban America.”² However, things become

¹ B. D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 168 (from which are also taken the following quotations). In what follows, I will make a frequent use of studies carried out either from a Hebrew Bible or a Christian Testament perspective. The reason for such a choice is that these particular branches of research have also made the more significant advances in the field of social-scientific and anthropological exploration of late Second Temple Judaism. See, for example, L. L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995); E. Stegemann and Wolfgang Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement: A Social History of Its First Century* [trans. O. C. Dean, Jr.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999 [German original edition, 1995]].

² As a matter of fact, nowadays the phenomenon of the globalization contributes to blur the traditional boundaries between the different communities. See, for example, P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
difficult when our knowledge of the social context is less satisfying or even non-existent. “Then if we want to learn something about the underlying social history we have no recourse but to use the text itself, reasoning backward from what it says to the social experiences that it appears to presuppose.” In other words, we are left with the text alone and our personal readings and hypotheses. This is the kind of “tricky business” in which are presently engaged not only the specialists of John but also the large majority of the Enoch scholars.

Before tackling the issue of tracing the social history of any hypothetical community that is supposed to have produced an otherwise perfectly isolated text, the first question that we should ask is if such a community ever existed. Theoretically, we cannot rule out the possibility that an unknown author wrote down such and such text in order to address not some specific issues at stake within his or her own group but a larger—not to say a universal—audience. Even if this option does not seem to correspond to what we know of the “collectivistic personalities” controlling the dynamics of Second Temple Judaism and other ancient Mediterranean societies, it is true that the production of literary texts follows special patterns that are sometimes at odds with the dominating cultural and social trends. Thus, authors could deliberately adopt the perspectives of other religious or social groups different from the one to which they originally belong, or they could take up storylines and motifs that were originally used by other groups different from their own. In fact, nobody can confidently reconstruct either who the original author of a given text was, or his or her pristine intentions. Scholars can only guess about the chances that the images of the implied or ideal author and audience correspond, more or less, to some historical persons and situations.

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3 This is the point that the contributors to the volume edited by R. Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), try to make.


5 This is especially true for the priestly authors belonging to Judaean power-holding groups that voiced their social and religious uneasiness in such proto-apocalyptic texts as Ezekiel 38–39, Zechariah 1–8, and Joel 2:1–11, 3–4. See S. L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Postexilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).