This book (revised dissertation) by Gwynned de Looijer is not an easy one to categorize. It represents a meta-level analysis of past Qumran scholarship, but it also includes some textual and exegetical analysis. It is not attempting to offer a philosophical discourse or reflect on larger changes within biblical studies that might illuminate the endeavors of a fairly young branch of scholarship such as the Qumran field. Yet it is a very welcome pause in the ongoing and changing paradigms: it invites readers to gather, look around and think of the past work done.

De Looijer introduces in Chapter 1 various aspects of past Qumran scholarship in order to build the case for her critique of the “Qumran paradigm” as founded on shaky assumptions of an extreme sectarian, Essene-like community at Khirbet Qumran. She situates herself as part of the scholarship that is already questioning this “Qumran paradigm,” but sees her task as especially showing how ideological observations about texts have been taken as proof of sociological stance of groups behind the texts. She stresses that the analysis on a literary level (what the texts claim to represent and accomplish) does not easily translate into full socio-historical analysis where all data is taken into consideration (textual, archeological, comparative evidence).

Chapter 2 deals with the classifications of the scrolls into sectarian and non-sectarian texts, which have played a major role in the construction of the community or communities behind the texts. De Looijer chooses to discuss two major classifications in the attempt to show how they rely on the concept of a coherent library. So even if Devorah Dimant’s classification was meant to work on a literary level, associating it with a “library” and the location of a specific group made it into a socio-historical classification, with the non-sectarian texts construed as texts of a parent group (44). The revised classification includes also “in-between” texts, which creates an implicit developmental model. This discussion would be easier to follow with some manuscript examples that demonstrated how their placement in classifications has been conceived over time. The second classification, by Florentino García Martínez (also known as the “Groningen hypothesis”), is more explicitly socio-historical and developmental from the outset but, according to de Looijer, presents its own problems, especially since it includes the idea of an apocalyptic movement and Essenes as precursors to the formative and sectarian phases but the criteria to distinguish these are not clear (76). When all texts need to be set into a diachronic
line of development, the possibility of simultaneous debates and groups can easily be overlooked (79).

Chapter 3 analyzes how theories of 4QMMT have distanced the Qumran sect from the society of its time. The document has been widely held as pre-sectarian because of its non-polemic, conciliatory tone and lack of sectarian terminology. Whereas recent scholarship has problematized the possibilities of reconstructing the composite text and determining the genre and the social setting in which the text functions, no suggestions have yet emerged about a setting completely outside this (pre-)sectarian framework.

In Chapter 4, de Looijer analyses various conceptualizations and typologies of dualism in Qumran scholarship and asks what kind of opposition actually lies behind the categorization of the sectarian texts. She first outlines some of the research history, and then focuses most extensively on Jörg Frey’s influential article on “different patterns” of dualism. Frey discussed altogether ten categories of dualism. De Looijer examines these in light of Udo Bianchi’s definition and understanding of dualism as a doctrine of “two irresolvable principles that cause existence” (169, 189), and eventually recognizes only two or three of Frey’s categories as representing Bianchi’s dualism. Qumran dualism is always moderate dualism which recognizes only one primordial principle. It is a welcome addition to present scholarship to critically consider where dualism functions as a fundamental worldview and where it can be understood as a natural mode of language in forming pairs and oppositions, and in the service of aims other than positing an independent ideology. Why Bianchi’s definition should be adopted and what it means in practice remains, however, somewhat unclear to me. Cognitive research on categorization and the human tendency to overemphasize similarities within one category and differences between categories could equally provide insights on why dualism remains such an attractive way of perceiving what is going on—both in texts and in scholarship.

Chapter 5, perhaps the most important chapter in my view, brings the discussion of dualism to bear on the research on Treatise of the Two Spirits in 1QS 3:13–4:26. De Looijer reviews past scholarship on the criteria by which the Treatise is identified as an earlier independent tradition, and on its redaction, dating, and connections to other texts. She then analyses the dualism of the Treatise and arrives at the conclusion that it is much more concerned with the sin and suffering of the righteous than any cosmic division of the world. Here as also elsewhere more recent scholarship would be significant to incorporate into the discussion.

Readers of this work may naturally desire to see what an alternative path might look like; this is only hinted at (Chapter 6) but not executed here. Many scholars are already on the way of investigating individual manuscripts—not