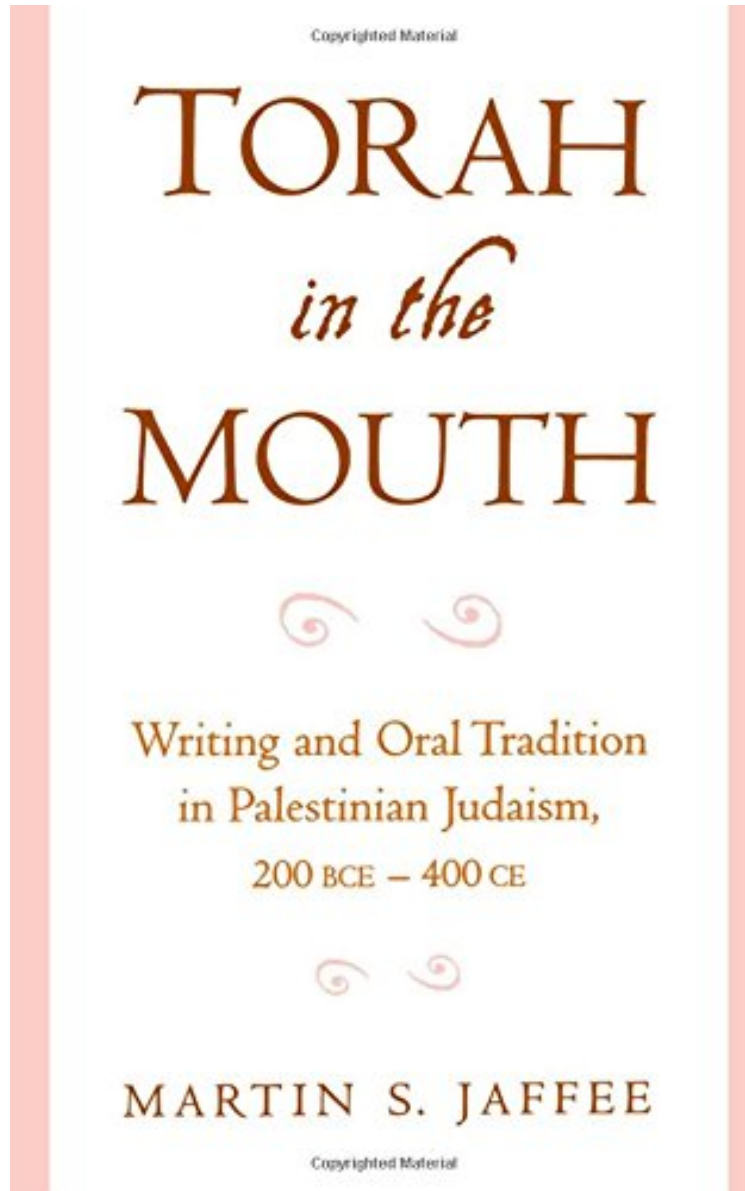


# Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE-400 CE

*Martin S. Jaffee*

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Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism 200 BCE-400 CE:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Impressive book on the oral Torah By Jeri Jaffee's book is notable for the sheer breadth of his scholarship. One of the more perplexing problems in the study of ancient cultures is the fact that most data was passed on orally. This is especially true for the Jews. Fishbane, and others, have argued that all of the Hebrew Scriptures testify to "manifold ways in which texts committed to manuscript were shaped by their passage through the prism of orally mediated ...tradition" (p 29). By the Second Temple period, famously, Josephus stated that oral scriptures were considered as binding as written scripture for the majority of Jews (Antiquities 10.2.1 XIII, 297). Also Philo (-10.2.2 The Special Laws IV 143-150), as well as perhaps Qumran. Naturally, these statements bring on a flood of questions. How were the oral traditions passed on? How accurately were they passed on? Who taught them? Were there schools? Frustratingly, we can only study traces that remain in the scriptures and try to deduce from there. Oral traditions formed the basis for culture through the ancient Greco-Roman world. Rote memorization was standard practice of education across the ancient world, and, in fact, it formed the basis for all education--much more than literacy. It was how culture was passed on. Jaffee argues that the rabbinic culture retained orality in a way that was "thoroughly 'literate'; and indeed, 'literary'" (p 124), however difficult a concept that is for moderns to grasp. The first "allusion to the existence of scribal schools in Jerusalem comes from the...second century BC in the writings of...ben Sira" (p 20) although actual data about schooling from the Second Temple period remains pitifully scant. (Side note: Price and Isaac of Tel Aviv University are about to release 12,000 graffiti inscriptions which may change all our knowledge on the subject.) Recent scholarship argues that the rabbinic movement in Roman Galilee "bore important functional similarities" (p 129) to rhetorical or philosophical Greco-Roman education. Jaffee shows that the written texts of rabbinic tradition was widespread. The halakhic teachings of the sage or rabbi continued on in the knowledge and practice of his students. "The primary goal of...study was not merely to master knowledge discursively. Rather, it was to be transformed by what one possessed (p 147).

The classical Rabbinic tradition (legal, discursive, and exegetical) claims to be Oral Torah, transmitted by word of mouth in an unbroken chain deriving its authority ultimately from divine revelation to Moses at Sinai. Since the third century C.E., however, this tradition has been embodied in written texts. Through judicious deployment and analysis of the evidence, Martin Jaffee is able to show that the Rabbinic tradition, as we have it, developed through a mutual interpretation of oral and written modes.

"This book is must reading for anyone interested in rabbinic literature, the history of ancient Judaism, and the role of orality in traditional societies and cultures."-- Religious Studies "The first word that comes to mind in reviewing Torah in the Mouth is elegant. It distills over twenty years of Martin S. Jaffee's innovative research into a single, readable whole, a modest 159 pages for the core text. All scholars or Rabbinic studies will want, and probably need, to read this book; so will many students of Second Temple Jerusalem. The insights of this book will probably interest New Testament scholars too, as well as those concerned with literacy and orality in cultures of discipleship, especially in late antiquity."- The Journal of the American Academy of Religion About the Author Martin S. Jaffee is at University of Washington.