Seth D. Kunin has published widely on structuralist analysis and the Bible; my favorite of his work is *The Logic of Incest* (1995). In this book he brings together themes and issues he has been interested in and intends to draw a (neo)structuralist profile of biblical literature, viewed as “ethnographic data,” on both levels of structure and narrative.

After a short introduction and overview, chapter 1 (5–28) lays the theoretical grounds for the basic framework used. Structural relations, valence, mediation, agency, transformation, myth and mytheme (a basic structural building block of mythology, with an oppositional center), and myth destructuring (implosion) are clearly explained. The author sets out the principles underlying his work, in the footsteps of C. Lévi-Strauss and E. Leach, but—as he claims later—with a difference: diachronic elements are incorporated (ch. 3).

Chapter 2 (29–103), in Kunin’s words the most substantial of the book’s chapters, is an extended critique of Mary Douglas’s work on Hebrew Bible food rules (surprisingly, not citing in the bibliography latest editions and revisions/rewritings on Leviticus!). An assessment of the debate and a reexamination of biblical materials concerning food, sacrifice, and purity conclude with the notion that the emphases on mixing categories and Genesis 1 are culturally and methodologically problematic, in spite of some agreement with basic assumptions. Instead, Kunin develops a model to which he returns again and again in subsequent chapters, on other issues:

The analysis demonstrated that Israelite culture, at least in respect of animals; [sic] food, sacrifice and purity, can be abstracted to a structure of dyadically opposed, mutually exclusive categories with no mediation. This equation can be
expressed in the formula A not B. This conclusion was in agreement with Professor Douglas’ general points about exchange and the role of mediating categories. (97–98)

An appendix on the logic of sacrifice rounds the chapter off.

Chapter 3 (104–46) is entitled “The Death of Isaac.” The text of the biblical Aqedah, Gen 22, is read together with another biblical text, Gen 37 about putting Joseph in the pit and his sale to Egypt, seen as an inversion of the dying/murder symbolical myth; the other intertexts are a selection of rabbinic midrashim about the Aqedah and the New Testament. Essential to Kunin’s argument is the notion that Isaac is, at least symbolically, killed then resurrected. Kunin concludes that, as with Hebrew Bible food rules, the underlying structure here is A is not B: there is “zero mediation” between Isaac and Ishmael, divine birth (Isaac) and human birth (Ishmael), even between Abraham/Isaac (on carrying the promise) and Abraham/God (on parenthood/paternity). For Kunin, the continued New Testament myth moves from negative mediation to positive mediation, a transformation that entails moving from the symbolical to Jesus’ actual death. An appendix deals with the same subject in the Book of Mormon.

Chapters 4 (147–67) and 5 (168–209) contain discussions of biblical texts in which women figure in central roles: Exod 4:20–26 (“The Bridegroom of Blood”) in chapter 4; and women as wives/sisters, danger and endogamy/exogamy, in Genesis and Judges, in chapter 5. The conclusion of chapter 4 suggests that the myth here is “clouded” and that there are indications that “Moses rather than Zipporah is transformed into an acceptable marriage partner—and as a part of the structural process of the transformation of Moses from a product of human birth into one of divine rebirth, a mytheme that is found throughout Israelite mythology” (167; emphasis added). In chapter 5, women—particularly wives—in Genesis are shown as ambiguous as potential mediators in the social culture, with the text experimenting with different marriage patterns to overcome this ambiguity. In Judges, the texts continue “the process of experimenting with women in different roles,” this time without focus on the “danger” issue, evidence of “defective” structures. Ultimately and contra to accepted wisdom, in Israel men rather than women were potential (dangerous) mediators, while women did not challenge the preference for endogamy.

Chapter 6 (211–46) returns to the issue of diachronicity and myth transformation (ch. 3) on the level of political/genealogical relations. A “recapitulation” of the Israel/nations:: inside/outside myth is described then formulated, along the lines of an earlier priests/Israel analysis, and presented as fruitful for further research.
Chapter 7 (238–46), entitled “The Structure of Hebrew Thought,” presents a synthesis, with the claim that “As a whole this volume particularly demonstrates the pervasiveness of underlying structure, while still retaining space for intercultural difference,” since “Transformation requires both internal and external motors for change.” A short bibliography and three indices (biblical, mishnaic/rabbinic [sic], general) are supplied as well (247–56).

As I was reading this book, and describing it, I had to remind myself of the Jewish dictum, “The Torah has seventy faces” (Num. Rab. 13:15). Applied to this book, this dictum would mean that structuralist, nay, neostucturalist analysis, as Kunin calls it, is certainly as legitimate in a climate of cultural pluralism as any other mode of inquiry into the Hebrew Bible, or any other literary product—never mind what this or any other reviewer chooses as preferred modes of Bible reading. However, I wonder, for most scholarly readers apart from aficionados of structural analyses, would the discussion clarify the central issues discussed (cultural identity, restructured memory, transformations, inversions, social change), or would they go away mystified? One must accept certain suppositions advanced in this book, such as what myth is or whether or not the literature examined qualifies as “ethnographic material” that indicates “Israelite cultures.” I find these suppositions, or assumptions, problematic and unconvincing. (This is hardly the place to indulge in the “Israelite” versus “biblical,” sociohistorical versus literary, discussion.) Moreover, to write about the structural roles of women by largely ignoring the vast feminist literature on the subject (the bibliography has some articles by Bal, Bird, Fuchs, Niditch, all from Alice Bach’s edited volume of 1999, Women in the Hebrew Bible) is of course possible but perhaps not profitable. Does Kunin think that feminist scholarship cannot contribute to his insights? One example will suffice here. Ignoring Ilana Pardes’s excellent chapter on Exod 4 in her Countertraditions in the Bible (1992, pp. 79–96) or her The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible (2000) in Kunin’s chapters 4, 5, and 6, is astounding—even if Pardes does not use his kind of structural analysis.

Chapters 3, 4, and 6, to a lesser extent chapter 7, are more or less revisions of the author’s earlier work, as admitted in the first footnote for each of these chapters. How do they tie in with the book’s title (We Think What We Eat; in large letters, but see the subtitle) and with the centerpiece, so to speak: chapter 2 on food rules and the critique of Mary Douglas’s influential work? The insistence on similar results for all the texts read and analyzed seems to me forced: that Isaac is at least symbolically killed is perhaps acceptable, but the claim that in Madam Potiphar and Joseph’s story (Gen 39) “The text raises and rejects exogamous marriage” (187) is really beyond my understanding; on the other hand, the assertion that the text “emphasizes the danger posed by women who are structurally outside (and sexually uncontrolled)” has already been observed.
Furthermore, looking at the bibliography I recognize very few works on food structuralism in general, and in the Hebrew Bible in particular. With some pique, may I mention *Food and Drink in the Biblical Worlds* (*Semeia* 86; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), edited by Prof. Jan Willem van Henten and me? Surely there is some material for the topic there, even if it is not strictly structuralist?

And a technical complaint: like many recent books published by Continuum/T&T Clark, the font size of both text and footnotes has been reduced, so much so that the footnote text is very small indeed, even for this reader with technologically advanced multifocal contact lenses.

Ultimately the question every reviewer must answer is: To read or not to read? In spite of my reservations, here is what I found. The book’s title is a little misleading. But if one is interested in biblical (not automatically “Israelite”) food rules, yes, do read chapters 1 and 2: this is the bulk of the book and, for me, was instructive as a way of regulating food, sacrifice, purity, cultural transformation for producers and readers of the relevant texts. Chapter 3 on the Aqedah contained important insights, especially concerning the “horizontal” opposition between Isaac and Ishmael (and I would have preferred this topic to be continued into the Qur’an, but this can be supplemented from other scholarly sources). I found the other chapters much less enlightening.