MONOSEMY IN BIBLICAL STUDIES:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RECENT WORK

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Abstract: This review article critically engages two recent monographs that utilize Charles Ruhl's theory of monosemy to analyze the New Testament. After outlining Ruhl's theory, I discuss how Gregory Fewster attempts to model monosemy within the linguistic framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, and how Benjamin Lappenga does so within the framework of Relevance Theory. Each makes important contributions, but I argue that neither has significantly improved on Ruhl's original model and that some of the modifications of Ruhl's theory end up being unhelpful or unclear. Nevertheless, both authors have persuasively exhibited the usefulness of a monosemic approach to studying biblical words and texts. (Review Article)

Keywords: Monosemy, Gregory P. Fewster, Benjamin J. Lappenga, Charles Ruhl, Lexical Semantics.

1. *Introduction*

Even though the dominant trend in the lexical and grammatical traditions within biblical studies has been towards polysemy, there are dissenting voices in biblical studies.[1] Stanley Porter, Gregory Fewster, and Benjamin Lappenga argue that observed variation is not inherent in the semantics of words themselves but rather a function of the context within which words occur. In other words, they agree that variation arises from contextual modulation, and that words themselves have a much more

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1. For discussion and references, see Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 51–53.

unified core of semantic information. In this sense, these three proponents of monosemy describe their position as a "monosemic bias."[2] In this paper, I will first introduce Ruhlian monosemy, and then assess and critique both Fewster and Lappenga's monograph-length studies incorporating monosemy, concluding that their work indicates some intriguing possibilities for future development, despite drawbacks apparent in their appropriation of Ruhl.

2. *Words, Polysemy, and Monosemy in Biblical Studies*

Words have always been a topic of much discussion for biblical scholars. On the one hand, lexical semantics has proven to be a fruitful area of research when engaged within biblical studies. For example, words can be analyzed in order to refine our assumptions regarding the meaning of biblical texts. On the other hand, lexical semantics has also proven to be a false foundation for many studies. Words can be invested with too much meaning, causing the proliferation of baseless claims that often take the form of posturing about the "true" meaning of certain words.[3] One of the assumptions that has arguably contributed to this convoluted state of affairs is the semantic role of polysemy. If by polysemy one simply means to refer to the variation in meaning that can be observed in actual utterances, there are few who would disagree with the claim that polysemy is "the natural condition of words."[4] However, if by polysemy one means to refer to a feature inherent in the words themselves—evident in any dictionary that lists multiple distinct senses for a lexeme— then there are, as mentioned, dissenting voices.[5] The basis of the monosemic approach is the work of Charles Ruhl. On his view, words do not have multiple distinct senses—utterances do. Instead, a word can be understood as a monosemous signifier,

2.   Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 53; Fewster, *Creation Language*, 36; Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 27, 29.

3.   Barr, *Semantics*, 107–60.

4.   Geeraerts, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, 42.

5.   See note 1.

contributing a single, monosemous semantic meaning to each and every utterance in which it occurs. Instances of words that appear to have incommensurably different meanings, then, are better understood as figurative extensions or homonyms (i.e. two words each with single meanings), rather than as one word with multiple meanings.

At bottom, this disagreement is a matter of orientation toward the data. Scholars who value systematicity and tight semantic descriptions will likely gravitate toward a monosemous perspective, whereas those who value the diversity and dynamism of polysemy are probably not going to find Ruhl convincing. Monosemy is a minimalist orientation;[6] polysemy is a maximalist one.[7] While neither side would claim thoroughgoing polysemy or monosemy within a lexicon—that is, some words will have one meaning and some words will have more or will be considered homonyms, regardless of the position—each side can be understood as a disposition that tends in either one direction or the other.

A reengagement of Ruhl's original monograph, I argue, is important for future incorporation of monosemy into biblical studies, and to this end I will offer an overview of Ruhlian monosemy and an example of its application before my critical analysis of Fewster and Lappenga's recent monographs.

3. *Ruhlian Monosemy*

Charles Ruhl's work on lexical monosemy comprises the first attempt to theorize a programmatic explanation of lexical monosemy.[8] According to Ruhl's theory of monosemy, the

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6.   Ruhl, *Monosemy*, ix.

7.   Geeraerts, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, 182.

8.   See the following two key works for a representative account of his work: Ruhl, *On Monosemy*; Ruhl, "Data, Comprehensiveness, Monosemy." The minimalist priority represented by monosemy has an unclear origin. While Ruhl was the first to publish a significant monograph with the word *monosemy* in the title, he was not the first to approach linguistic analysis as a minimalist. Two others are worth mentioning here. First, William Diver's approach— Columbia School linguistics—attempts to discover a consistent or invariant

lexicogrammatical meaning, or meaning potential of a sign, is a generalization of its meaning in all its contexts. I take "meaning in context" to be a sign's apparent contribution to the contextual messages to which it contributes. If one generalizes what is common to all contextual messages that include a sign, so Ruhl articulates, one has identified the lexicogrammatical meaning of the sign, because the sign is the common denominator between all of its uses in a corpus. Ruhl describes this insight as the comprehensiveness principle:

> The comprehensiveness principle: The measure of a word's semantic contribution is not accuracy (in a single context) but comprehensiveness (in all contexts).[9]

Providing a method to actualize this comprehensive approach, Ruhl's hypothesis in *On Monosemy* is twofold: (1) "A word has a single meaning," and (2) "If a word has more than one meaning, its meanings are related by general rules."[10] As he explains, "An

meaning that accurately describes each linguistic sign in a language. Diver began to work out his theoretical approach in the 1960s, and thus the school of thought he originated constitutes a precursor to Ruhl's work. Ruhl at one point mentions the meaning–message distinction in reference to several Columbia School proponents. See Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 33. For an outline of Diver's theory, with a description of his originality, see Huffman, "Linguistics of William Diver." A second minimalist linguistic analysis has already been mentioned, namely, Stanley Porter's *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*. Porter's approach seeks to explain the formal features of the Greek verbal system. For Porter (*Verbal Aspect*, 7), "formal" features are morphologically-based. Porter (*Verbal Aspect*, 13, 75) thus identifies morphological categories, and attempts to explain as much data as possible with little to no exceptions by postulating a single, consistent meaning for each grammatical form. *Verbal Aspect* was published in the same year as Ruhl's *On Monosemy*, and thus these works both represent important though apparently independent advances in minimalist linguistics. Furthermore, while Ruhl addresses lexical monosemy, Porter's work focuses on grammatical monosemy. Though Diver had originally analyzed part of the Greek verbal system, Porter's analysis has—unlike Diver's—stood the test of time. See discussion of Diver's analysis in Reid, "Quantitative Analysis." Ultimately, Ruhl's work on monosemy, particularly his accounts of comprehensiveness and abstraction, was not unprecedented.

    9.   Ruhl, "Data, Comprehensiveness, Monosemy," 172.

   10. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 4.

initial presumption of monosemy does not question the existence of multiplicity; rather, it implies that current analyses find too much multiplicity too easily, and so provides a means for testing each particular claim."[11] This initial presumption Ruhl terms a "monosemic bias."

While the term *bias* seems to imply that monosemy is a theoretical position, a predisposition toward the data—and there is some truth to this—what Ruhl actually advocates is a method of identifying a word's semantics. "This Monosemic Bias," he explains, "implies a priority of research: a full detailed exploration of a word's variant range before considering its possible paraphrase relationships with other lexical items."[12] The bias he speaks of, then, is actually a method of analysis: "Assume that any meaning that is not present in all contexts of a word is not part of the word's inherent meaning; if this fails, assume distinct meanings are figuratively related."[13] That is, Ruhl argues that lexical analysis should proceed from the assumption of monosemy, attempting to explain observed variations in meaning by positing pragmatic mechanisms at work in actual utterances.[14] An example will be useful.

3.1 *Pragmatic Factorization of* Ἀρχή

The noun ἀρχή is assigned seven senses in BDAG:[15]

(1) The commencement of something as an action, process, or state of

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11. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 5.
12. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 4.
13. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 234.

14. For Ruhl, the terms *pragmatic* and *semantic* are moving targets, though they always identify some kind of boundary between what is contextual and what is decontextualized to some degree. At times, he seems to be saying that semantics is concerned with invariant meaning at some rank (word, word group, sentence, paragraph, or discourse), whereas pragmatics concerns meaning beyond the rank being analyzed. At other times Ruhl describes semantics as intralinguistic meaning and pragmatics specifically as extralinguistic meaning. See Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 17. However, see discussion below of Lappenga's assessment of Ruhl's use of these terms.

15. Ruhl frequently uses the treatments of dictionaries as an entry point when seeking a common denominator.

being, *beginning*

(2) One with whom a process begins, *beginning*

(3) The first cause, *the beginning*

(4) A point at which two surfaces or lines meet, *corner*

(5) A basis for further understanding, *beginning*

(6) An authority figure who initiates activity or process, *ruler*, *authority*

(7) The sphere of one's official activity, *rule*, *office*

Each of these senses can be tentatively related to a general sense of INITIATION,[16] whether that be temporal as in (1), spatial as in (4), or mental as in (5). These uses show that ἀρχή does not carry within itself the more concrete distinctions of spatial–non-spatial, temporal–atemporal, mental–physical; rather, ἀρχή can relate to any of these, but only by virtue of co-text and context. Moreover, the senses offered in BDAG exhibit several notable uses of metonymy. Senses (2) through (3) can be understood as metonymic specification, more concretely specifying the beginning as the entity who causes the beginning. The metonymically-shifted meaning of the causative entity can be further metonymized to refer to the role associated with the entity—the entity's office or rule. According to the nuances reflected in senses (2) and (3), furthermore, this beginning is not marked as either *the* beginning or simply *a* beginning. In the spatial beginning of (4) we see a similar imprecision: the corner appears to the observer to be the place where something begins; it is *a* beginning, while not necessarily constituting the only or first. Thus, these observations can be restated as pragmatic mechanisms:

(a) spatiality condition: ἀρχή does not semantically distinguish between spatial and non-spatial meaning. Whether the term refers to a spatial meaning is determined pragmatically.

(b) temporality condition: context is also required to distinguish between temporal and atemporal meaning. The temporality of the sense is

16. The use of small caps is an orthographic convention that I have adopted from Columbia School work. My intention is to signal a definition or meaning—one that in some sense parallels the sparsity or indeterminacy of the term being defined—while avoiding the misunderstanding that a meaning like INITIATION is a gloss or translation equivalent for the term being defined. For a Columbia School example, see Huffman, *Categories of Grammar*, 31.

determined pragmatically.

c) physicality condition: ἀρχή must be contextually modulated to distinguish between mental or physical senses. Mental or physical meaning is determined pragmatically.

d) ἀρχή can be metonymically extended to refer to the causative entity that initiates a process, or further generalized to the causative entity's role. These figurative extensions are determined pragmatically.

What I am doing is simply noting the variation in meaning that is evidenced among the various senses and describing those variations as pragmatic effects. The rationale behind this move is simple: if ἀρχή can potentially mean any of these various senses, it does not convey any one of them specifically; rather, the variation is best explained with reference to pragmatic conditioning—that is, the effect of co-text and context—or to figurative extensions of more concrete senses.

Important questions at this point include where the pragmatic conditions come from and how many one is allowed to posit to explain the data. Ruhl offers an explanation:

> By now, some readers may have the uneasy feeling that pragmatic rules are beginning to proliferate without restraint. A good theorist is likely to wonder where it will end. But linguists who expect to find a limited number of pragmatic rules, or rules typically with only a few options, are mistaking the task; they are trying to make pragmatic rules into semantic rules. Listing pragmatic rules may be an infinite task: all knowledge of the world can be included. In dealing with language, we are used to expecting only a few possibilities; but pragmatic rules can be much more various, since our full knowledge is much more various. This difference between semantic and pragmatic (between what is relatively closed and what is relatively open) is a key part of this book's argument. A pragmatic rule is justified if it accounts for data, and as fully as possible.[17]

The first step in Ruhl's method is to outline the variation—even the polysemy—of a word as it is actually used in utterances: what kind of variation in meaning can be observed? Here I have assumed that BDAG offers a relatively thorough account of the variation ἀρχή exhibits, though it is likely that BDAG has

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17. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 36.

underestimated the amount and scope of this variation.[18] The boundaries between senses are subjectively assigned, but the semantics of the word, according to Ruhl's minimalist notion of semantics, are more objective—though not totally objective, of course—by virtue of the fact that one must identify those pragmatic effects that are not common to "all" contexts of a word. One cannot be objective when identifying the contextually modulated message of an utterance, because there are too many variables to consider, and the reader brings numerous assumptions to the text. Only after this diversity in meaning is noted can a line be drawn between a word's semantics and its pragmatic modulations. As Ruhl explains, "the boundary of semantic and pragmatic cannot be drawn generally in advance, but must be discovered, word by word, phrase by phrase, even sentence and discourse by sentence and discourse. No reasonable theory can evade or postpone this necessity."[19] As for ἀρχή, perhaps INITIATION does capture the semantics of the word; perhaps it does not. What it does attempt is the identification of a unifying factor that draws together all of the various senses of ἀρχή without overspecifying or resorting to etymology or "original meaning." I leave it to the reader to evaluate the preliminary semantic definition offered in this brief example.

To summarize: Ruhl ascertains a lexeme's semantics by pragmatic factorization.[20] Pragmatic factorization explains variation, rather than simply recording it. By positing pragmatic mechanisms, Ruhl attempts to account for how a stable semantic core of meaning is modulated by context.

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18. As Ruhl (*On Monosemy*, 173) says, "I am arguing that we cannot discover the sense(s) of a word without fully gauging its applications. Dictionary definitions, especially of common words, highlight a few applications, which implicitly deny a unified sense, and thus underestimate the full range of applications."

19. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 71.

20. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 71. I have introduced the description "pragmatic factorization" for clarity. Ruhl calls this method a monosemic bias.

4. *Fewster's* Creation Language in Romans 8 *(2013)*

Gregory Fewster's work, exploring the ramifications of analyzing Paul's use of "creation language," especially the noun κτίσις in Romans 8, constitutes the first major monograph dedicated to exploring the impact of lexical monosemy in New Testament studies. Fewster's work deserves careful attention, as lexical analysis is an area of biblical studies that has exhibited widespread and systemic problems.[21] Here I will offer an overview of Fewster's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)-based model of lexical analysis, which he calls "corpus-driven systemic-functional monosemy."[22] Second, I will take issue with two aspects of Fewster's study: his dismissal of Ruhl's model of monosemy as simply a "cognitive" approach, and his method of analyzing metaphorical or figurative word meanings, which is less adequate than the method proposed by Ruhl.

4.1 *Summary of Fewster's Corpus-Driven Systemic-Functional Monosemy*

Fewster's goal is to "describe and defend . . . a robust lexical semantic methodology."[23] He accomplishes this task by undertaking a study that (1) covers a general theory of words, (2) analyzes a particular word by means of corpus data, and (3) introduces a nuanced account of a "lexicogrammatical metaphor theory."[24] Each of these steps will be summarized in order.

4.1.1 *Systemic functional monosemy*. Of primary importance to Fewster's modelling of Paul's language is the systemic nature of language.[25] SFL, according to Fewster, views language as a "social semiotic," realizing social realities by means of language functions that are constrained by a language-specific system of

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21. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 13–17; Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 10–13.

22. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 73.

23. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 17.

24. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 83.

25. Another important feature is the functional nature of language, but I will deal with this below; here I will focus on the systemic aspect.

choices.[26] In other words, the book of Romans is a social interaction between Paul and his readers, and this interaction is *realized* or constituted by the functional language Paul uses in the letter. The meaningfulness of the functions Paul performs— the meaning of what he says—depends on what he could have said instead. The meaning of one language choice depends on the other choices that were available to the speaker. Therefore, the meaning of Paul's creation language in Romans 8, on Fewster's SFL-based model, should be analyzed in comparison to the systemically-constrained choices available to Paul, and the mutual realization that takes place between the context of situation and the language involved.[27]

4.1.2 *Corpus-driven analysis.* When it comes to the data Fewster chooses to incorporate into his analysis, he uses a corpus-driven approach. He explains, "Sound conclusions require, first and foremost, a reasonable and balanced environment for observation."[28] This environment is provided by a corpus of texts. That is, instead of focusing solely on a small sample text, such as Romans, he compiles a corpus of representative documents.[29] He goes on to clarify, "A corpus is used to provide statistically relevant data based on patterns in language instances that can be generalized to the language as a whole, from which specific texts might be compared."[30] Fewster chooses to draw generalizations from a large sample of language in order to better

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26. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 39.

27. It should be pointed out that this view of language is not fundamentally at odds with other approaches to language, such as Relevance Theory (which is the framework of choice for Lappenga's analysis; see below). Contra Clark (*Relevance Theory*, 359), the difference between these approaches is simply the locus of analysis. Where SFL considers the bidirectional impact of language on context and context on language, Relevance Theory chooses instead to focus on the (more or less) unidirectional impact of language upon the reader's mental state.

28. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 53.

29. See "Appendix One: Outline of Specialized Corpus," in Fewster, *Creation Language*, 175–76.

30. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 54.

understand a smaller sample, and this approach lends cogency to his analysis.

4.1.3 *Lexicogrammatical metaphor.* A third aspect of Fewster's approach is a lexicogrammatical view of words as regards metaphor. That is, whereas traditional grammar represents lexis (word-choice) and grammar as entirely distinct areas of language meaning, Fewster chooses to view lexis as a grammatical choice—that is, lexicogrammar unites the two.[31]

Fewster should be commended for attempting to account for metaphorical word usage using a lexicogrammatical view of language. The idea of lexicogrammar is powerful, even though much work remains to be done. For example, we have lexicons of Hellenistic Greek, and we have grammar books—some of these are better than others—but we do not have lexicogrammars of Hellenistic Greek. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what a lexicogrammar would actually look like. Nevertheless, such questions need to be explored, as they will open up new avenues of grammatical analysis that cannot be addressed according to the traditional lexis–grammar distinction. Fewster's attempt to outline a theory of lexicogrammatical metaphor, I would argue, is on precisely the right track.

Fewster also examines metaphorical usage from the perspective of monosemy. In his model, metaphor involves an atypical usage of a lexeme. However, this atypical usage not only includes the usual tropes like anger is heat, or argument is war. These kinds of atypical usages constitute lexical metaphors because they involve lexical meanings. Lexicogrammatical metaphor is an atypical usage of a lexeme in which grammatical meanings are involved.[32] An example that comes up in Fewster's study is κτίσις, which typically refers to a created thing, an *entity*, but which can also be used to refer to the *process* of creating. This usage, Fewster argues, demonstrates grammatical metaphor because the process κτίζω is lexicalized as a noun, κτίσις. This

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31. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 44–45. Cf. pp. 82–93.

32. Halliday and Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction*, 698–731; Thompson, *Introducing Functional Grammar*, 233–54.

kind of grammatical metaphor is called nominalization. Lexicogrammatical metaphor, then, attempts to take account of the fact that metaphors can be lexical or grammatical, or even both at the same time. While I affirm the effort to view lexis and grammar as a continuity, I will outline some issues with Fewster's approach to lexicogrammatical metaphor in the next section.

4.2 *Critical Assessment of Fewster's* Creation Language in Romans 8

There are two general issues I want to raise with respect to *Creation Language*. First, Fewster misrepresents key aspects of Ruhlian monosemy. While this misrepresentation is probably unintentional, a clearer account of Ruhl's method would have helped Fewster avoid needless, and perhaps deleterious, duplication of some of Ruhl's methodological steps. Second, Fewster's proposed method of analyzing metaphorical or figurative word meaning is weaker than Ruhl's proposed method. In some ways, *Creation Language* prematurely dismisses Ruhl because of a perceived association with cognitive linguistics, and this premature dismissal causes Fewster to miss out on some of Ruhl's insights regarding monosemic analysis.

4.2.1 *Fewster's construal of Ruhl.* In Fewster's monograph, he adopts Ruhl's theory of monosemy, but with hesitation. He is critical of Ruhl's theory on the grounds that it is, he claims, based in "cognitive linguistics."[33] Fewster explains,

> Ruhl's version of 'extreme monosemy' does have some shortcomings in terms of its utility in the present context. Monosemy is fundamentally a cognitive linguistic theory and in that regard is primarily concerned with a lexeme's semantics as it relates to the conceptual ordering of the mind, and thus shares many of the shortcomings of cognitive polysemy. The theory, therefore, may be unable to adequately address meaning in terms of social interaction.[34]

33. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 36–37.
34. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 39.

Several things can be said in response to this claim. First, Ruhl actually self-identifies as a tranformational-generative linguist. To pigeonhole his theory as a "cognitive linguistic theory" is simply unclear. There are aspects of Ruhlian monosemy that can be called cognitive in some sense. For example, generalized definitions, Ruhl argues, best reflect the way we remember words, and his notion of semantic fields, he claims, reflects the structure of the human mind in terms of the way we draw abstractions. However, it is unclear why this "cognitive" element should disqualify Ruhl's arguments without further critique, especially as Ruhl's monosemic bias does not require analysis of cognitive aspects of meaning. Moreover, whereas cognitive linguistics is generally maximalist in its approach,[35] Ruhlian monosemy is a minimalist endeavour.[36] Grouping Ruhl together with cognitivists thus obscures the distinctiveness of his position.

Second, the world is not divided into cognitive and functional linguistics. Rather, cognitive linguistics, a movement that emerged in the 1980s, takes the functional nature of language to be fundamental.[37] So while Fewster is fully justified in adopting SFL as a framework, I would argue that Ruhlian monosemy is compatible with functionalism, including both social and cognitive frameworks. This is an important point to make, because if monosemy is going to have a broad impact on biblical studies, it will need to be, to some degree, framework independent. SFL asks distinctive questions about language instances, but it is not inherently better than cognitive approaches; it is just better at answering the distinctive questions that it asks.

For example, SFL asks *why* particular language is used, and finds its answer in the particular context of use.[38] Moreover,

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35. Geeraerts, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, 183.

36. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, xi.

37. Geeraerts, *Theories of Lexical Semantics*, 267.

38. Fewster (*Creation Language*, 39) explains, "Context informs language use, while language use in turn forms and re-forms the social context. Systemic [functional] linguistics, therefore, posits a direct link between a given context and the use of language within that context."

because language is an irreducibly social phenomenon, a particular context of language use is necessarily describable as a social context—and SFL proponents would argue that this is actually the most appropriate way to view the context. Yet I would agree with Fewster that it is possible to adopt a social, functional framework, to ask social and functional questions, and nevertheless to utilize key features of Ruhl's approach to word meaning.

This claim is evident when we consider the building blocks of Fewster's theory and method. Fewster's account is theoretically rigorous. He introduces, independently of Ruhl, a corpus-driven approach, a systemic view of language, and a lexicogrammatical view of language, and he explains the advantages of SFL over a "cognitive" approach by citing its systemic view of language choice and meaning, its functional approach to analysis, and the fact that lexis and grammar are treated as ends on a continuum. Yet each of these theoretical and methodological building blocks is already demonstrably present in Ruhl's monograph. Ruhl *does* view language as a system, he adopts a mediating approach between formalist and functionalist approaches,[39] he bases his observations on the examination of naturally-occurring utterances, and he explicitly treats lexis and grammar as parts of a broader continuum from abstract to concrete.[40] Moreover, all of these points are in fact theoretically indispensable for Ruhl's method of ascertaining what words mean. So while Fewster is fully justified in looking to other sources as he examines each of these issues, the premature nature of his dismissal of Ruhl's monosemy is evidenced by his inclusion of additional pieces of theoretical infrastructure as though Ruhl's theory does not already provide them.

Third, Fewster's method of analyzing lexemes, though developed in detail, lacks the coherence that makes Ruhl's method so attractive in the first place. Ruhl's hypothesis is, very simply, that contextual information can be filtered out of a semantic definition by positing pragmatic conditions that

39. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 200.
40. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 182–83.

account for the meaning variation that is evident. Fewster may be attempting this kind of pragmatic explanation, but it is unclear how his analysis takes place. He simply presents his findings along with a number of corpus examples and some discussion.

Noting these points, I find it perplexing when Fewster states, "In light of its [Ruhl's theory's] (occasionally unhelpful) cognitive beginnings, I have shifted the notion of the monosemic bias into a systemic functional framework. In this light, abstracted semantic values are understood as meaning potential that is realized in the lexicogrammar of discourse."[41] It is unclear by what procedure Fewster actually arrives at his "abstracted semantic values."

4.2.2 *Fewster's lexicogrammatical metaphor.* In addition to these concerns about Fewster's representation of Ruhl, I have concerns about the way that Fewster identifies a metaphorical usage as an atypical or "dynamic" usage of a lexeme that diverges from the "typical" or "congruent" usage.[42] This way of understanding the distinction between literal and metaphorical is underdeveloped at best. Contrary to Fewster's claims, it is unlikely that the literal meaning of a word can be reliably determined on the basis of frequency or "typicality."[43] A metaphorical extension of a word is

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41. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 167.
42. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 88.
43. I am interpreting Fewster's comments on pp. 88–89, where he says that corpus analysis reveals the most typical patterns of usage, to entail that typicality is a matter of numerical frequency, as this seems the most likely way to read his explanation. Fewster may have meant something different by statements like "typicality in a corpus" and "the corpus is a helpful tool for measuring congruence"—perhaps something more akin to Halliday's view of congruent usage as "the most straightforward coding of the meanings selected" (Halliday and Matthiessen, *Halliday's Introduction*, 731). However, neither Fewster's nor Halliday and Matthiessen's actual method of identifying what is congruent is obvious in their discussions. Fewster sometimes describes congruent and typical usages as the same thing, but he also notes that metaphorical uses may be typical. Regardless, my argument in this section is that Fewster would have been better served theoretically by engaging with the approach to metaphor analysis already provided by Ruhl.

not just an atypical usage, but a non-literal or figuratively extended use of a word.

I suggest that Ruhl's understanding of metaphor and his method of distinguishing literal from figurative usages are more intuitive and reliable than Fewster's, because of Ruhl's programmatic definition of abstraction as superordinacy. Viewing a vocabulary as a cline of increasing concretion, Ruhl is able to make sense of figurative usage in a way Fewster cannot. This is best illustrated by way of example.

In *On Monosemy*, Ruhl analyzes the noun *ice*. What he finds is that there are at least two meanings of *ice* that are very difficult to relate to each other. On the one hand, *ice* can be defined as "water frozen solid."[44] But, notes Ruhl, this literal meaning does not encompass figurative, emotion-related uses of *ice* (i.e. implying fear or horror). So on the one hand, as "water frozen solid," *ice* is a very concrete word—that is, it is easily referable to an extralinguistic reality, and on the other hand, as a sense of fear or horror, *ice* is a more abstract word. According to Ruhl, this is an example of metaphoric extension because the more abstract sense can be understood as a figurative extension of the concrete sense. In fact, if *ice* did not literally mean "water frozen solid," it is unclear how *ice* as a sense of dread would make sense at all—a sense of dread is like the feeling of ice. The direction of figurative extension here is critical; frozen water is not called *ice* because it is like a sense of dread, but a sense of dread can be called *ice* because it (apparently) reminds us of the feeling of water frozen solid. Fewster claims that the more frequent meaning is the literal, and the atypical meaning is the figurative; by contrast, Ruhl demonstrates that the literal meaning is rather the more concrete of the two meanings, the one on which the figurative meaning relies for meaningfulness and comparison. "Water frozen solid" is the ground; fear or horror is the figure. Thus, Fewster's own model of metaphor, while attempting to incorporate the lexicogrammatical perspective Ruhl outlines, nevertheless neglects the programmatic definition

44. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 192.

of abstraction that makes monosemic metaphor analysis coherent.

Moving through the final chapters of Fewster's monograph, one is left somewhat confused as to the necessity of the monosemous lexical analysis offered earlier on. This confusion arises in part from Fewster's inclusion of an abstracted, monosemic gloss alongside of an account of its metaphorical extension. In the monograph, κτίσις is accorded the gloss "created thing."[45] However, Fewster also contends that κτίσις participates in a semantic domain/chain that interacts with other semantic domains/chains in the construction of a large-scale metaphor about the redemption of humanity—the created things.[46] If κτίσις is a monosemous word that can refer literally to the created human body—as Fewster contends—its use in Romans 8 is literal, not metaphorical.[47] On Fewster's own analysis, then, I would argue that a metaphorical extension of κτίσις does not actually occur in Romans 8. Because Fewster combines lexical and grammatical metaphor into one theoretical conception, he attempts to explain a large scale conceptual metaphor (involving multiple lexemes) as no different than a grammatical metaphor, and ends up describing a non-figurative use of κτίσις as a metaphor when in fact the usage of κτίσις in question fits with the monosemous definition he himself assigns to it.

If κτίσις is a monosemic word that is used to refer to created things, including the human body, then its use in referring to the human body is not a figurative extension of its ground usage. Κτίσις in Romans 8 does exhibit grammatical metaphor (if the

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45. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 146.

46. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 123–24.

47. Fewster (*Creation Language*, 148) makes it clear that he has in mind both lexical and grammatical metaphor, saying, "Nominalization of this sort is lexicogrammatical metaphor at its clearest; there has been a shift in the grammar of the passage, yet there are lexical implications as well. The choice of the nominal κτίσεως in this clause [i.e. in Rom 8.19] is metaphorical in the classical sense—one thing is being referred to in terms of another." Perhaps the relationship between κτίσις and σῶμα could better be construed as hyponymous rather than metaphorical. That is, a σῶμα is a kind of κτίσις.

noun κτίσις is used to describe a process or act, although this usage, too, could be included in a monosemic definition); however, κτίσις does not exhibit lexical metaphor. Fewster's inclusion of grammatical metaphor is important in moving lexical analysis forward for biblical studies, but his theory of lexicogrammatical metaphor—at least in *Creation Language*— ends up potentially misconstruing both lexical and grammatical metaphor as they pertain to κτίσις.

   In summary, Fewster's *Creation Language* is an intriguing attempt at incorporating lexical monosemy into biblical studies, tested in regards to κτίσις in Romans 8. Fewster successfully demonstrates both the appeal of the theory and its utility for biblical studies. His analysis is cast in the framework of SFL, yet readers from various perspectives will benefit from his study. While I have outlined several areas that require further development or clarity, *Creation Language* is an important trailblazing work that is sure to play a critical role in the conversation about lexical semantics in biblical studies.

5. *Lappenga's* Paul's Language of Ζῆλος *(2015)*

The second monograph I wish to discuss here is Benjamin Lappenga's *Paul's Language of* Ζῆλος*: Monosemy and the Rhetoric of Identity and Practice*. Discussion of this study will be brief for two reasons: first, Lappenga does not attempt to outline an extensive linguistic method as does Fewster;[48] second, Lappenga's study employs an onomasiological rather than a semasiological approach.[49] A semasiological approach begins with (typically) a linguistic sign (or signs) and proceeds to ascertain information about that sign's meaning within a speech community. An onomasiological approach, by contrast, begins with a meaning that occurs and then explores its communication by means of various linguistic signs.[50] In order to explore how

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   48. This is not meant to imply a deficiency in Lappenga's study, only that Fewster dedicates much more space to outlining his linguistic methodology.
   49. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 66.
   50. As Geeraerts (*Theories of Lexical Semantics*, 23) puts it,

Paul talks about Christian social identity and practice, Lappenga examines the concept of *zeal* by means of the ζηλ- word group. Because Lappenga's monograph is not strictly dedicated to linguistic analysis, his account of monosemy is briefer. I will primarily assess Lappenga's comments and critiques with respect to both Ruhl and Fewster's approaches to monosemy, with a brief discussion of Lappenga's alternative method. While I am largely critical of Lappenga's engagement with Fewster and Ruhl, Lappenga's approach to monosemy, which he casts within the framework of Relevance Theory, presents an intriguing approach to using monosemy for qualitative lexical analysis.

5.1 *Lappenga's Account of Ruhl*

Lappenga's proposal for monosemy, while innovative and promising, is unfortunately situated within what I take to be unjustified and highly critical discourse. He identifies three problems with Ruhl's *On Monosemy*: (1) the "need for more terminological clarity regarding semantics and pragmatics," (2) "overconfidence about our ability to determine what is in fact a 'convention,'" and (3) Ruhl's claims about general, abstracted word meaning.[51] Each of these points deserves a response.

First, Ruhl, contrary to what Lappenga claims, does offer a nuanced account of the semantics–pragmatics interface. Although this particular issue is mentioned throughout Ruhl's book, Section 7.2, "Semantic–Pragmatic," is particularly notable.[52]

Second, I would question Lappenga's assertion that Ruhl exhibits overconfidence. Lappenga, for his part, takes a highly individualized view of lexical meaning, given that everyone must have an ultimately unique mental lexicon.[53] Ruhl's idea of

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"semasiology starts from the expression and looks at its meanings, onomasiology starts from the meaning and looks at the different expressions."

51. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 29.

52. Ruhl's alleged lack of clarity is attributed to a few stray comments at the beginning of *On Monosemy*, which Ruhl subsequently elaborates upon.

53. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 44. However, Lappenga attempts to identify mental lexicon entries primarily in regard to the effect of written texts on the readers of that text.

generalized semantic meaning shared by users of a language, then, would seem to be in conflict with this position. However, one of the key themes of *On Monosemy* is the complex interaction between language as an idealized system of conventional meanings and language as a highly diverse set of events and instances. The following quotation hopefully answers Lappenga's charge of "overconfidence about our ability to determine what is in fact a 'convention.'" Ruhl explains that only some linguistic knowledge is conventional or shared among all users of a given language:

> some words are common knowledge, while others are not; and, even with a common-knowledge word, some of its contexts are common and some are not. That is, we have both unity among all speakers, and on a fairly specific level, and also diversity, by dialect, idiolect, register, or otherwise.
>
> I am claiming that some knowledge of a language is shared by all speakers of that language. More generally, some highly abstract knowledge will be common to speakers of all languages.[54]

Rather than exhibiting overconfidence, Ruhl simply attempts to make generalizations of the data.

Third, Lappenga notes that "Ruhl's proposal for monosemy moves in the right direction but falls short because of its reliance on a lowest common denominator approach to 'general meaning.'"[55] What Lappenga specifically objects to is the apparent uselessness of a meaning that is abstracted from all contextual usages. He claims, "Even if certain patterns can be detected among the uses of a word, how can such a vague 'general meaning' be useful, particularly to the study of ancient texts such as those found in the NT?"[56] Similarly, he refers to this perspective on semantic meaning as "fruitless abstraction."[57] This point is the most important, as it presents a potentially serious objection to the use of Ruhlian monosemy in biblical studies. After all, if it is useless, then it is unlikely to appeal to

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54. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 144–45.
55. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 54.
56. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 30.
57. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 31.

biblical scholars who are exploring the potential usefulness of linguistics within the field of biblical scholarship. Because this third critique of Ruhl dovetails so much with Lappenga's critique of Fewster, however, I will proceed to this latter critique and mention Ruhl where relevant.

5.2 *Lappenga's Account of Fewster (and Ruhl)*

According to Lappenga, Relevance Theory is a framework for explaining how words come to have particular meaning in texts, not an explicit method for identifying those meanings.[58] For a method of definition, therefore, he turns to Ruhl's monosemy. Based on his understanding of Ruhl, Lappenga does not attempt to define *zeal*, and actually critiques Fewster for defining κτίσις. Ruhlian monosemy, according to Lappenga, is a theory of the radical underspecification of words; words cannot be adequately defined, hence they should not be defined.[59]

Unfortunately, this is a misunderstanding of Ruhl. Using a paraphrase to describe a lexeme is not a problem, because Ruhl's theory does not explicitly reject paraphrases; he argues only that many, not all, words are incapable of being adequately paraphrased.[60] In fact, Ruhl explicitly claims the opposite of what Lappenga asserts. As noted above, Ruhl defines *ice* as "water frozen solid."[61] Lappenga offers the argument that only procedural (i.e. grammatical) but not conceptual words can be paraphrased. Yet Ruhl paraphrases *ice* because it is a conceptual

58. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 52. According to Relevance Theory, the most relevant mental items are activated for the lexeme's mental grab-bag.

59. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 34–35.

60. Lappenga (*Paul's Language*, 55) notes that, in contrast to Ruhl's work, Fretheim's "more helpful" study of monosemy also uses paraphrases, but explains that this is not as problematic as Ruhl's use because Fretheim offers definitions for *procedural* words, rather than *conceptual* words. Cf. Fretheim, "In Defence of Monosemy." Fretheim analyzes four terms, and the last (Norwegian: *med en gang*/*med det samme*) is actually, according to Fretheim, a conceptual lexeme, with an encoded "conceptual meaning" shared, moreover, by the two "synonymous lexical items" ("In Defence of Monosemy," 107).

61. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 200.

rather than grammatical word.[62] Contrary to Lappenga's construal of Ruhl, Ruhl actually says, "A literal meaning [i.e. definition] need not be solely semantic, if at all."[63] In other words, a definition should usually include some pragmatic information; the more concrete the word, the more pragmatic information is necessary in order to produce an adequate definition. Though I agree with Lappenga that the way Fewster arrives at his definition of κτίσις is unclear, it is a misrepresentation when Lappenga labels Ruhl's notion of general meaning a "fruitless abstraction" that Fewster "does not move past."[64]

Lappenga also mistakenly critiques Porter and Fewster for merely "paying lip service to Ruhl,"[65] claiming, "My approach maintains ties with Ruhl; Fewster's does not."[66] I find this to be a puzzling critique in three ways. First, both parties are manifestly advocating the use of a monosemic bias within biblical studies, so why not highlight the common ground? Second, neither party even refers to, much less interacts critically with or "maintains ties with" Ruhl's theory as it is developed beyond the first few chapters of *On Monosemy*.[67] Third, there is no reason beyond

62. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 177.

63. Ruhl, *On Monosemy*, 192–93.

64. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 31–33. In particular, Lappenga (*Paul's Language*, 35–36) claims, "Like Porter, Fewster proposes a monosemic meaning that, although paying lip service to Ruhl, fundamentally diverges from Ruhl's radical underspecification of semantic content in favor of a readily definable monosemic value . . . Yet Fewster has neither endorsed Ruhlian monosemy nor offered an alternative semantics-based argument for the monosemic bias. Thus it is difficult to see how either Porter's or Fewster's 'monosemic account' has moved us any further than other proposals for 'general meaning.'" Lappenga's critique specifically concerns the use of a "readily definable monosemic value," as opposed to a radically underspecified—or unspecifiable—semantic value. This critique would hold more water if Ruhl did not explicitly offer paraphrases/definitions for other words such as *ice*.

65. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 35.

66. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 36.

67. As far as I can tell, neither Fewster nor Lappenga actually makes reference to Ruhl beyond the halfway point of his monograph. Porter

utility or coherence to demand strict adherence to one theory. Lappenga should know this, as he proceeds to castigate Ruhl's notion of general meaning while still attempting to utilize a monosemic bias. As long as coherence is achieved, theorists are free to be creative.

Lappenga points out that "Fewster's dismissal of cognitive approaches is far too sweeping, since language-in-use can in fact interact efficiently with a cognitive framework."[68] As noted above, I agree with Lappenga's critique on this point. However, I find Lappenga's dismissal of Fewster to be equally sweeping. "Unfortunately," Lappenga disputes, "by dispensing with the way Ruhl understands monosemy actually to function, Fewster has forfeited any substantive theoretical basis for holding to a monosemic bias."[69] I cannot see why this critique does not cut both ways. It is unclear how Lappenga's own particular reading of Ruhl justifies adopting Ruhl's method, much as it is unclear how Fewster's reading of Ruhl condemns Fewster's own appropriation of monosemy. Luckily for both authors, this critique in fact cuts *neither* way. There is no fundamental affinity or dissonance between monosemy and either Relevance Theory or SFL, and whether one framework is closer to Ruhl's than the other is entirely immaterial.

Fewster's definition of κτίσις is also the object of Lappenga's criticism. The latter asks,

> If '*something that has been brought into existence*' is present in all occurrences [of κτίσις], how does Fewster account for instances where the *act* of creation and not a *thing* is in view? . . . Fewster does not consider such questions before arriving at his preferred monosemic value for κτίσις.[70]

This critique is once again puzzling, since Fewster discusses grammatical metaphor at length and explicitly notes that κτίσις exhibits a common pattern of being a nominalization of the act

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(*Linguistic Analysis*, 51–53) engages in a more thorough summary of Ruhl than either.

    68. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 37.
    69. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 36.
    70. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 36.

of creation. Thus, notes Fewster, "This nominalized construal functions, first and foremost, to concretize the reader's experience of a creative act, that is to say, a creation always implies a creative act."[71]

In summary, Lappenga's critiques of both Fewster and Ruhl appear to be unwarranted. Thankfully, this does not invalidate Lappenga's own novel approach to monosemy, which I will now briefly describe.

5.3 *Lappegna's Monosemy-Based, Relevance-Theory-Inspired Analysis*

Lappenga's goal is to analyze the development of a concept within Paul's letters. While ζῆλος is assigned multiple senses in the lexicon, Lappenga aims to identify what it is that semantically bridges Paul's repeated uses of the ζηλ- stem. Paul's repetition, he argues, is intended to shape the audience's concept of ζῆλος, to modify "the cognitive environment of the hearer."[72] "My argument," he explains, "is that multiple occurrences within a text or corpus do in fact shape one another, and that the appropriate way to account for this (especially for exegetical study) is to endorse a monosemic bias."[73]

Lappenga relies on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, with its attendant view of meaning: specifically, the meaning of an utterance is underdetermined by the words used to communicate it.[74] An author chooses words that will convey the most meaning while requiring the least effort. Ultimately, this leads Lappenga to construe the ζηλ- word group as a "grab-bag" of ideas and concepts that are variously activated in context according to the audience's assumptions about what is most relevant to Paul's message. "To summarize my proposal," he

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71. Fewster, *Creation Language*, 112.
72. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 41.
73. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 54. According to Lappenga, Paul creates an ad hoc concept of zeal through repetition of the ζηλ- word group. It should be noted that Fewster (*Creation Language*, 116), too, includes a discussion of ad hoc domains.
74. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 41.

says, "a definition of ζῆλος might contain some elements that can be communicated with words, but must be conceived of as a single grab-bag of mental items (memories, mental images, pieces of encyclopedic and/or anecdotal information)."[75]

Of course, words can be conceived of in many different ways. Linguistic analysis is not merely the presentation of objective facts about language; it necessarily involves a construal of language. Psychological approaches to meaning analysis are not inherently more suitable than social approaches any more than psychology represents the human experience "better" than sociology does. It is simply a matter of arriving at different answers to different questions. Lappenga's Relevance-Theory-inspired approach to monosemy provides a useful tool for discovering what can be made of key concepts in the biblical text. Viewing multiple instances of a lexeme together helps us to avoid the mistake of assuming that we cannot infer meaning beyond what is explicitly lexicalized in a given utterance. "Most important," explains Lappenga, "is that the writer will leave implicit everything the reader can be trusted to supply 'with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit prompt.'"[76] Thus the analysis of concepts, in light of Lappenga's study, should not attempt merely to reproduce the explicatures of the biblical text; it should also seek to identify the most relevant implicatures, with the aim that we would read the entire text according to its own implicit and explicit aims, so far as those can be inferred.

Though Lappenga diverges significantly from Ruhl, his analysis of the ζηλ- stem fits well within Ruhl's notion of semantic fields. The stem, on this view, comprises a superordinate category with semantic substance that is subdivided more specifically by its hyponyms. Thus, Lappenga's approach to lexical analysis provides a case study in analysis of lexical items using monosemy.

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75. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 56.

76. Lappenga, *Paul's Language*, 48. Citing Green, "Relevance Theory and the Literary Text," 215.

6. *Conclusion*

My primary critique of both Fewster and Lappenga is the limited sense in which they conceive of monosemy as a methodology. While Ruhl's method involves positing pragmatic mechanisms to factor out contextual modulation in order to identify a word's semantics, neither of the authors attempts an explicit analysis along these lines. When they mention a "monosemic bias" they seem to mean something like a willingness to assume that monosemy is more correct than polysemy. Thus Fewster ends up arriving at a definition based on a process that he does not make entirely explicit in his monograph (he outlines many observations, but does not explain exactly how he factors out contextual modulation), and Lappenga decides to avoid providing a definition altogether.

Fewster has displayed the corpus-linguistic use of a monosemic bias within the framework of SFL, and Lappenga has offered an example of how relevance theory can be used in conjunction with monosemy to answer questions about concepts within the biblical text. Both of these authors have helped to set a trajectory for the kind of monosemy-based study that Porter has proposed,[77] and it is to be hoped that others will see the potential as well. Future development should take cues from both these authors, and methodological questions should continue to be raised and answered.

Though I have offered a number of critical remarks regarding both of the monographs mentioned in this review, my criticisms do not detract from the value of either the monographs themselves or the role that a monosemic bias plays in these monographs. It is always easier to critically evaluate than to do the hard work of theoretical trailblazing, and all the more so in biblical studies, where traditional methods are heavily entrenched. Both of these monographs have advanced the minimalist trajectory for analyzing the meaning of words, and for that the authors are to be strongly commended.

77. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, 59.

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