

EVALUATING THE VALIDITY OF THE “THREE MISSIONARY JOURNEYS” STRUCTURING MOTIF IN ACTS

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Abstract: *The three missionary journeys of Paul provide a standard structural outline for Acts. However, it is questionable whether this was Luke’s literary intention. In fact, the division was not recognized until 1742 and then popularized by mission agencies. This article argues that structures are both internal and external to a text; overviews constructions of the three missionary journey model; and critiques this model from the perspectives of history of interpretation, literary emphasis, and grammar. An alternative structuring model is found in more recent works (*Asian Mission and Aegean Wandering*) and I point out some hermeneutical implications. Finally, I return to arguments for the three missionary journey model and argue that a dotted line, not a heavy line, should be drawn between the “second” and “third” journeys which reveals more unity between them.*

Key words: *Acts, structure, Paul, missionary, journey, outline, Luke, mission, gospel, witness*

A text without a structure is a text without a meaning. As one philosopher said, “Men die because they cannot join the beginning to the end.”¹ This paper concerns the larger structure of Acts, and more particularly the structure of Acts 13–20 and the now-famous “missionary journeys of Paul.” The acceptance of this model is evidenced by the maps at the back of most study Bibles visually charting these journeys. However, is the missionary journey model Luke’s structural intention? And if not, what insights arise if we begin to view this portion of Acts under a different banner?

Structure, like genre, is both internal to a text and external to the text. It is internal in that one adheres and pays attention to certain clues from the text itself and tries to compose divisions. It is external in that it is truly laying a framework upon a text formally external to it. Luke does not give us an explicit structure for his work; we deduce it. Structural analysis therefore combines both an author-centered approach and a reader-involved method.

Will Kynes gives the example of constellations for genre theory in this regard which applies to structure as well.² The stars exist, but the lines between them are

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¹ Alcmaeon of Croton; quoted in Mark C. Taylor, *Abiding Grace: Time, Modernity, Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 229.

² Will Kynes, *An Obituary for “Wisdom Literature”: The Birth, Death, and Intertextual Reintegration of a Biblical Corpus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

put there by observers. In the same way, the text and clues in the text exist (objectively, like stars), but how one associates one star with another is interpretation.

I. ACTS AND STRUCTURE

The structure of Acts is uncontroversial in the sense that most contend 1:8 gives some sort of clue to the structure of the whole narrative: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."³ Most argue that verse eight functions as the Table of Contents for Acts.⁴ The rest of the book details how Christ's people are witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and Rome.⁵ A distinctly geographical, theo-political, and ethnic presentation of the spread of the good news exists in Acts and the order is important.⁶

However, the difficulty comes in trying to figure out precise divisions within this broad view. Three examples of the difficulty should suffice here. First, do chapters 6–7, the introduction of Philip and Stephen, fit with the Jerusalem narrative, or should this section push one into the Judea and Samaria narrative? They are

³The ethnic reading is supported both by the allusions to Isaiah and the intertextual connection with Matt 28:19 where Jesus calls his disciples to go out to all "nations" (*ethnē*). Holly Beers argues this commission paints the apostles as the new Isaianic servants. The Spirit anoints the servant (Isa 42:1; 61:1), the servant is chosen (Isa 49:7), the servant is the witness (Isa 43:10, 12; 44:8), and the servant has a mission to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). Holly Beers, *The Followers of Jesus as the "Servant": Luke's Model from Isaiah for the Disciples in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 535; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 128–30.

⁴Tannehill disagrees, arguing there is no reference to the spread of the gospel to Antioch, Asia Minor, or Greece. He claims it is more accurate to say that Jesus outlines the mission, and Acts ends with the mission still incomplete. However, the phrase "the ends of the earth" could still summarize the beginning of the mission to Antioch, Asia Minor, and Greece. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation: The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 2:17–18. The strongest argument against this structure concerns the middle section since Antioch, Syria, Damascus, and Jerusalem are included in chaps. 8–12. Mark L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfilment in Lukan Christology* (JSNTSup 110; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 3–4. However, Luke can use Judea in both a more proper way (the southern district of Palestine distinct from Galilee; 9:31) and a more general way (encompassing all Palestine; 10:37). I take Judea and Samaria as a merism covering that entire region. The two regions are linked grammatically and include the adjectival modifier "all" (*καὶ [ἐν] πάσῃ τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ καὶ Σαμαρείᾳ*).

⁵Luke makes no mention of Galilee. Interpreters differ on why Luke omitted Galilee. Some say it was intentional because Galilee was already Christian land based on Jesus's ministry. Others assume Luke simply does not know about the mission to Galilee. Keucker is likely right to point out that in Acts 1:1–11, Jesus's disciples operate with two layers of social identity: Galilean and Israelite. They are a regional subgroup and they are called to go to Jerusalem, Judeans, Samaritans, and the ends of the earth, all of which involves crossing boundaries. Jesus says the Spirit will come on them and they will be "his witnesses" to the "other," thus desacralizing and de-centering their ethnic identity. This does not mean they lose it, but their mission is to the "other." Aaron J. Kuecker, *The Spirit and the "Other": Social Identity, Ethnicity and Intergroup Reconciliation in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 444; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 98–104.

⁶The allusions in v. 8 are not only to the OT but speak to the power of the Roman Empire who made her empire safe and navigable for the celebration and spread of Greekness and *paideia*. The implication is that God, in Christ, through the Spirit has created a Christian empire parallel to Roman rule. Laura Salah Nasrallah, "The Acts of the Apostles, Greek Cities, and Hadrian's Panhellenion," *JBL* 127.3 (2008): 533–66.

Hellenists, but Hellenistic Jews. Philip will be the one to take the good news outside of Jerusalem. The Stephen narrative, on the other hand, has a distinct temple focus. Does Stephen’s temple sermon therefore climax the Jerusalem narrative, or should one divide Stephen and Philip since Philip goes to Samaria and then witnesses to someone from the ends of the earth? This is not an easy question, and it slightly shifts how one reads the narrative.⁷

Second, the summary of the new community’s actions in 2:42–47 is difficult. Does that summary of the life of the church conclude the founding of God’s new people or does it transition readers into chapters 3–5 since chapter 3 expands upon the summary of 2:42–47? Peter and John are in the temple in chapter 3, while 2:46 says they were daily in the temple.⁸ In 3:1–10, readers hear of Peter’s healing of the lame man, while in 2:43 they were told of “many wonders and signs” taking place through the apostles. The lame man has faith, and 2:41 speaks of those accepting Peter’s message, and 2:47 references many being added to their numbers. Again, where to place this text is difficult.

A final example will suffice. In Acts 8:1–3, Luke recounts Saul’s involvement with Stephen’s death. Does this conclude Acts 1–7 or begin 8–12, if one even agrees with that division? In one sense, it closes the Stephen narrative, but in another it kickstarts the scattering of God’s people, so that Philip goes down to Samaria.

These examples are particularly difficult, because they are likely interlocking texts. Interlocking texts are a literary tool and make the text fit in between and transition from one part of the narrative to another. Lucian (125–180) writes of this literary practice in this way: “When the first part is complete the second will be brought into essential connection with it, and attached like one link of chain to another; there must be no possibility of separating them” (*Hist. conscr.* 55). Quintilian states there should be “a certain continuity of motion and connection of style. All its members are to be closely linked together” (*Inst.* 9.4.129).

The point is the structure of Acts at a larger level is generally agreed upon, but once one begins to look to the details, it becomes more complex. The so-called

⁷ Pervo, *Acts*, 152. Keener, and some others, takes 6:1–9:31 as a unit. Keener entitles it “The Hellenist Expansion,” since the focus is on Stephen, Philip, and the Hellenistic nemesis Saul. This fits with Goulder’s proposal that there is an election story (1:23–26; 6:3–6), a teaching, arrest, trial, and the Spirit’s arrival (4:31; 8:14–17). Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2: 3:1–14:28 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1247–48. This narrative could be viewed as opening a new section, but it is still focused on Jews and followed by a “temple” sermon.

⁸ This next portion of Acts mainly takes place in the temple. Luke frames Acts 2–5 with temple references (2:46 and 5:42) and closes out the section with the longest sermon in Acts: Stephen’s temple sermon. These temple references form a bookend to the stories and also centers these events not only in Jerusalem, but more specifically in the center of the world where Jews believed God met with his people. Jesus had already promised them that their work would begin in Jerusalem and go out to the ends of the earth. The cosmic reign of God begins in the temple, indicating the blessings of restoration will go out through the presence of God which now resides in the apostles through the name of Jesus. Pentecost has brought a new stage to the acts of the risen Lord Jesus; who now directs the affairs of earth from his throne in heaven through the work of the Spirit.

missionary journeys of Paul fit this paradigm of complexity, especially the division between the second and third journey.

1. *Summary statements outline.* The outline of Acts adhering to the summary statements should be addressed at this point. Many follow the summary statements as the narrative clues as to where to break the narrative. This avoids the three missionary journey model. In this view, the editorial marker “the word of God increased/multiplied” (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31) is used as a climax to each section creating seven panels or sometimes three or four. The point here is that the gospel is shown to prosper despite the persecution. Below are two examples of the summary statement outlines.⁹

Summary Statements Outline 1
Jerusalem Church (1:1–6:7)
Expansion to Judea, Samaria and Gentile Areas (6:8–12:24)
Expansion into Asia Minor and Europe (12:25–19:20)
The Word Continues to Prevail through Paul (19:21–28:31)

Summary Statements Outline 2
Foundations for the Church and Its Mission (1:1–2:41)
The Church in Jerusalem (2:42–6:7)
Stephen, Samaria, and Saul (6:8–9:31)
Peter and the First Gentile Converts (9:32–12:24)
Paul Turns to the Gentiles (12:25–16:5)
Further Expansion into the Gentile World (16:6–19:20)
To Jerusalem and Rome (19:21–28:31)

While there are many benefits to these outlines, they also suffer from a few weaknesses. First, the break between 2:41 and 2:42 seems overly forced. Second, Acts 6:7 does not bring about the shift from Jerusalem. This shift more likely comes after Acts 7 and Stephen’s climactic temple sermon. Third, while there are some good arguments to break the narrative at 19:20, the Ephesian ministry continues after 19:20. A large riot occurs in Ephesus, marking a conclusion to the Ephesian narrative. Because of these reasons, in the following sections I will no longer address the “summary statement” structural model, though there is some validity to it.

II. THE THREE MISSIONARY JOURNEYS

This brings us to the three missionary journey model. Many commentaries and outlines, when it comes to Acts 13–20, take the typical route of dividing Paul’s

⁹The second outline is based largely on those found in the introductory textbooks of D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, eds., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 286–90; Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles Quarles, eds., *The Cradle, The Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 411–13.

initial travels into three missionary journeys. For example, David Peterson, in his Pillar commentary, sees Paul’s travels in the following way:¹⁰

David Peterson		
First Journey	The Word Goes to Cyprus and Asia Minor	13:1–16:5
Second Journey	The Word Goes to Europe	16:6–18:22
Third Journey	The Word in Ephesus	18:23–20:38

I. Howard Marshall presents this structure:¹¹

I. Howard Marshall		
First Journey	The Mission to Asia Minor and Its Aftermath	13:1–15:35
Second Journey	Paul’s Missionary Campaign in Macedonia and Achaia	15:36–18:17
Third Journey	Paul’s Missionary Campaign in Asia	18:18–20:38

John Polhill gives this perspective:¹²

John Polhill		
First Journey	Paul Turns to the Gentiles	13:1–15:35
Second Journey	Paul Witnesses to the Greek World	15:36–18:22
Third Journey	Paul’s Witness Overcomes Opposition in Ephesus	18:23–21:16

The first journey is almost universally accepted among commentators.¹³ A commissioning occurs in 13:1–3. Paul goes to Asia Minor with Barnabas and then they return to Antioch in 14:26–28 and report what had happened. Next, the Jerusalem Council occurs in chapter 15. An Antioch bookend follows, and then they travel down to Jerusalem to see what the church will say of their first mission.

Most then move on to see two other missionary journeys. Large agreement exists that Macedonia and Achaia are the second journey, and Ephesus is the third, but where this third journey specifically begins is contested.¹⁴ Most understand the beginning to be somewhere in or around the travel narrative in 18:18–23. The text, which becomes an important one for my purposes, is as follows:

¹⁰ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), x.

¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 56.

¹² John B. Polhill, *Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (NAC 26; Nashville: Holman Reference, 1992), 74–75.

¹³ C. K. Barrett, *Acts 1–14* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2004), xi; Craig Keener, *Acts*, 2:xii; Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 56; Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), vii; Peterson, *Acts*, x; Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), vii.

¹⁴ Barrett (18:24); Bock (18:24); Fitzmyer (18:23); Marshall (18:18); Parsons (20:1); Talbert (18:2); Schnabel (18:23); Witherington (18:24).

After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. (Acts 18:18–23)

A number of commentators even find a break between verse 22 and 23.¹⁵ Paul goes to Antioch in verse 22, and then verse 23 says that after he spent some time there, he departed and went throughout the region of his first journey strengthening the disciples. But it is questionable whether this break works. No grammatical or literary clue exists to interrupt the narrative here, except the reference to Antioch. The question is then raised as to whether the missionary journey scheme is Luke's intention. Are there enough clues, or "stars," in the narrative to draw these lines? Or has it been so regularly assumed that we are now locked into this perspective uncritically?

2. *Questions about the three journeys.* At least three problems arise with regard to the division between the second and third journeys: (1) history of interpretation; (2) literary emphasis; and (3) grammar. First, when one looks into the history of interpretation, the evidence shows that the three missionary journey model was not recognized until 1742 in the work of J. A. Bengel (*Gnomon Novi Testamenti*). However, Bengel began the third missionary journey at 19:21. None of our early interpreters of Acts mentions this threefold division: neither Chrysostom, nor the Venerable Bede, nor Oecumenius of Tricca. Nor do Erasmus, John Calvin, Beza, or Grotius.

The proposal gained popularity as it was picked up by major commentators (Heinrichs, Meyer, Alford) and then mission agencies in the late 17th and early 18th century so as to provide patterns for missionaries to go out and return to a central location.¹⁶ In other words, it is likely that the missionary journey pattern in Acts corresponds to the rise of modern missionary societies. While this late recognition does not necessitate error (genetic fallacy), it does raise suspicion. Interestingly, more and more modern scholars are no longer following the typical three missionary journey model (Alan Thompson, James Dunn, Richard Pervo, and Craig Keener).¹⁷

¹⁵ As seen in Peterson and Polhill above.

¹⁶ John T. Townsend, "Missionary Journeys in Acts and European Missionary Societies," *ATR* 68.2 (1986): 99–104.

¹⁷ Alan Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke's Account of God's Unfolding Plan* (NSBT 27; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 64; James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), vi; Richard I. Pervo, *Acts* (ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 20; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1: *Introduction and 1:–2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), vi.

Second, the division between Acts 18:22 and 23 is quite artificial from a literary viewpoint and does not seem to follow Luke’s aim in this section. While the return to Antioch and Jerusalem is significant after the first missionary journey, this return is passed by with little comment. We have no idea what happened as Paul returned to Antioch. Luke formally makes little of this return journey. All we know is that he spent “some time” there. Unlike giving his return more than a chapter after Paul’s first journey, Luke gives it only a few words in Greek: “he went down to Antioch, and after spending some time there.”

Third, though there might be a slight transition between verses 22 and 23, there is not enough to make a strong break. In fact, the more natural grammatical and thematic break comes at 18:24 or 19:1. Verse 23 begins with *kai* and a participle and does not have the typical grammatical indicators for a shift in emphasis. On the other hand, 18:24 begins with a nominative followed by *de* which is a more likely break; this verse has not only a grammatical indicator but a scene and character shift as Apollos and Ephesus are introduced. Not until 19:1 is Paul brought back into the picture.

Therefore, because of the history of interpretation, literary emphasis, and the grammar, there are reasons to question whether the three missionary journey model is part of Luke’s intention.

III. THE AEGEAN TRAVEL MODEL

Therefore, if a division between the Macedonian/Achaian mission and the Ephesus narrative is erased, then what other options arise in terms of structure? A number of them exist, but for sake of simplicity I will focus on one other option divided into two schematics: the Aegean Travel model.¹⁸ After that I will return to the three missionary journey model and note some strengths.

The other option, as already indicated, is not to view the return to Antioch in chapter 18 as marking a break between the second and third journey. This option would create two “outings” by Paul, one official journey sanctioned by the church in Antioch, and then an “Aegean wandering” (on the eastern and western side of the sea) comprised of Macedonia, Greece, and Ephesus (15:36–21:14). From this perspective, some de-emphasize the “sending and return to the church” and view Paul more as a pioneer who is led into the unknown like Abraham. The second journey does begin with a scuffle between Paul and Barnabas, and Paul attempts to

¹⁸ Bruce, Bock, Dunn, Holladay, Keener, Pervo, Spencer, and Köstenberger/O’Brien all see the second and third journeys as united. Bruce titles 16:6–19:20 as “Evangelization on the Aegean Shores.” Bock calls it the “second and third journeys,” while Keener titles it “Paul and Companions in Asia and Achaia” (15:36–19:41). Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), viii; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 13; Dunn, *Acts*, vi; Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), xi; F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 169; Pervo, *Acts*, 319; Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (NSBT 11; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 149. Keener, *Acts*, 3:vi.

go a certain way but is led by the Spirit across the sea. This does paint the second outing in a different way than the first journey.

There are two different ways, under this single banner, in which one could compare these journeys.

First Journey (Asia Minor)	
13:1–3	Companions/Sending (Paul and Barnabas)
13:4–14:20	Asia Minor (Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Lystra)
14:21–28	Journey back through cities and to Antioch
15:1–35	Jerusalem Council

Second Wandering (Aegean)	
15:36–16:5	Companions/Fight (Paul, Silas, and Timothy)
16:6–18:17	Aegean West (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth)
18:18–23	Travel Narrative
18:24–28	Apollos
19:1–41	Aegean East (Ephesus)
20:1–21:14	Journey back through cities and to Jerusalem

Alternatively, Alan Thompson gives this schematic which puts the two journeys in parallel.¹⁹ This provides two commissioning scenes, two ministry scenes, two scenes of nurturing churches, and two evaluations in Jerusalem.

First Journey		Second Journey	
13:1–3	Commission in Antioch	16:6–16:10	Commission in Antioch/Troas
13:4–14:20	Ministry in Cyprus, Pisidia, Lyconia	16:11–19:41	Ministry in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus
14:21–28	Nurturing the churches	20:1–21:14	Nurturing the churches
15:1–16:5	Evaluation in Jerusalem	21:15–36	Evaluation in Jerusalem

A number of points support either of these groupings. As already mentioned, it is not clear that 18:18–23 should be set aside and made to be a travel narrative in the same respect as 14:21–28. Ephesus is in fact introduced in 18:19 and that will be Paul's place of mission for the next largest section of the narrative. Though Paul leaves Ephesus and returns, it clearly introduces the next stop. Therefore, to say that 18:18–23 is a strong division like Paul's journey back through Asia Minor and then back to Antioch in the first missionary journey strains the evidence. If anything, it is an interlocking text linking both journeys together, and therefore from Luke's literary perspective he may want us to view them together.

¹⁹ Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus*, 64.

A second argument for unity between Paul's work on the east and west side of the Aegean sea is the reality that Paul does not travel back through Macedonia and Greece until the end of his stay at Ephesus (20:1–6). After Paul's first missionary journey he revisits the churches on his way back to Antioch and Jerusalem. This has the effect of linking these two journeys. But this type of journey back through Macedonia and Greece does not occur in 18:18–23. He does travel back through Asia Minor encouraging the disciples as verse 23 indicates, but the return trip to Macedonia and Greece takes place in 20:1–6. This may link the mission to Ephesus with the mission to Macedonia and Greece and indicate Luke sees them as a whole.

1. *Hermeneutical implications.* Structures are only interesting for how they shift the way in which one reads the narrative, so one must ask how an Aegean Travel model affects a reading of Acts. First, Paul may begin to be viewed as a more of a pioneering traveler after his first journey; a wanderer led by God like Abraham. The second outing begins with a disagreement and the Spirit tells him specifically where to go. This reading would also allow us to compare and contrast the sending narratives: In the first journey, Paul goes with Barnabas. In the second, an argument arises and Paul goes with Silas but is led almost completely by the Spirit. When Paul sets off in Acts 16, he tries to go up north, but the Spirit directs him to Macedonia. If he had a plan from the church, that plan is quickly altered. In many ways, Paul could be viewed as not following a plan set out for him by the church but more being tugged along by the Spirit. As Townsend says,

To be sure, the travels of Paul to Cyprus and Asia Minor depicted in Acts 13–14 do describe a missionary journey based in Antioch; but, after Paul's break with Barnabas in Acts 15:39f, the pattern changes. Paul simply goes out into the Gentile world to wherever the Spirit would lead him and remains on the move until he reaches Corinth.²⁰

Second, though we assume Paul's return to Jerusalem and Antioch was met with open arms in Acts 18, Luke does not formally tell us what transpired. Could it be that Paul encountered resistance and therefore set off to continue the work he thought he must finish? Because of the three missionary journey model, we assume he goes back and is welcomed and sent off again. But Acts 21 shows a return filled with trouble, and it may be that Paul's visit is filled with hardship and he must leave to continue God's work. This is a very different reading than how we usually fill in the gaps in this narrative. Townsend puts it this way:

Apart from chapters 13–14, the story in Acts shows little concern in depicting Paul's travels as a series of missionary journeys from a home base in either Jerusalem or Antioch. Rather, the author of Luke-Acts portrays Paul as an independent itinerant. After the journey from Antioch, which is the one missionary journey in the traditional sense, the Paul of Acts heads out from Antioch like Abraham forsaking Ur of the Chaldees (Gen 12:1). Both venture out into the

²⁰ Townsend, *Missionary Journeys in Acts*, 100.

unknown with only the Divine to guide them. Like Abraham, Paul was leaving in order to find a new place to settle.²¹

Third, linking the two latter journeys allows one to see the theology of heightening tension and persecution of God's servant Paul. In the cities Paul visits on this second trip, he faces accusations and accusers. Comparing some of these parallels to discern patterns might produce exegetical fruit.

City	Accusation	Accusers	Verdict
Philippi (16:20–21)	Importing customs that undermine Roman customs	Gentiles	Beaten, Prison
Thessalonica (17:6–7)	Acting contrary to Caesar's decrees declaring Jesus is king	Jews	Expelled, Bound
Athens (17:18)	Declaring foreign deities	Gentiles	Ridiculed
Corinth (18:13)	Persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the law	Jews	Dismissed
Ephesus (19:25–27)	Claiming the gods made by hands are not gods and thereby despising other gods	Gentiles	Innocent

IV. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF THE THREE MISSIONARY JOURNEY MODEL

While the grammar, literary structure, and history of interpretation are attractive in considering another proposal for this section of Acts, ultimately there is enough evidence to retain a threefold journey but with a more nuanced relationship between the second and third journeys and a different breaking point than some commentators propose. The three missionary journey model could look something like this.

First Missionary Journey (Asia Minor)	
13:1–3	Companions (Paul and Barnabas)
13:3–14:20	Asia Minor (Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Lystra)
14:21–28	Journey back through Asia Minor and to Antioch
15:1–35	<i>Journey to Jerusalem Council</i>

Second Missionary Journey (Macedonia and Greece)	
15:36–16:5	Companions (Paul, Silas, and Timothy)
16:6–18:17	Macedonia and Greece (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth)
18:18–23	Journey back to Antioch and through Asia Minor

²¹ Ibid.

Third Missionary Journey (Ephesus)	
18:24–28	Apollos
19:1–41	Asia (Ephesus)
20:1–21:14	Journey back through Macedonia and Greece and to Jerusalem

The arguments for keeping the three-journey model are as follows. First, although Luke does not make much of Paul’s return to Antioch in chapter 18, if the text is organized geographically (1:8) then it is hard to pass this detail without noting the importance of Paul’s return to his sending church. In fact, Luke has a tendency to emphasize a point in his narrative more explicitly at first and then shorten the same thing later on. This largely happens with the speeches of Peter and Paul, and it also occurs with their miracles. The first miracle will be an entire narrative, and the second one will be a two-verse summary. Therefore, the pattern Luke gives us provides some warrant for reading into Paul’s return to Antioch.

Second, though the break between 18:22 and 18:23 seems to be forced, the break between 18:23 and 18:24 is not. In 18:24, there is a scene change. It moves from Paul’s travels to Ephesus and from Paul to Apollos. The grammar is more indicative of a change as well. Therefore, while the break in the narrative between verses 22 and 23 does not work, Luke does give some indication in verse 24 of a scene change (or 19:1). Thus, 18:18–23 is an interlocking text, linking and separating the journeys.

Third, enough parallels exist between the journeys to see them as mirroring each other. Two of them begin with companions, and the third begins with another missionary, Apollos. All of them have the “mission” in the middle and then end with a travel narrative. In the travel narratives, Paul returns to the places he has visited before. In addition, it is not right to view the second journey as more of a “pioneering” journey in terms of not being sent out by the church. In 15:40, though Paul and Barnabas have had a falling out, Paul chooses Silas and they depart, “having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.” They are affirmed before they go out. What this means is Paul’s journeys are less haphazard and more planned. He regularly returns to his home base. Paul is presented as a “sent one” who checks back regularly with the home church. He has a good relationship with them, and he works under the banner of a larger authority structure. The missionary movement was not wrong to try to link missionaries to local and sending churches.

Fourth, the “third journey” is punctuated by visits and references to Ephesus. This separates the Ephesian ministry from what Paul did in Macedonia and Greece. It is from Ephesus that Paul returns to strengthen the churches in both major areas he has already ministered: Asia Minor (18:23) and Macedonia (20:1–6). As Spencer says, “Ephesus marks a pivotal site for reviewing and previewing major stages in the church’s missionary saga.”²² Ephesus becomes a climax or swan song of Paul’s

²² Spencer, *Acts*, 192.

mission as a free man. All these reasons do point to some sort of division between Paul's mission to Macedonia and Greece (Achaia) and Asia.

V. CONCLUSION

So where does this leave us? It may seem disappointing that this study has ended up simply affirming the standard view—though this conclusion keeps study Bibles from the expense of redoing their maps! However, going through this process and recognizing that a heavy line should not be drawn between the second and third journey, but rather a dotted line, opens up new interpretative possibilities. It allows a reader to link Philippi not only with Thessalonica, Antioch, and Corinth, but also with Ephesus. In this reading, one can see both a relationship between the journeys and the benefit of viewing them separately.

As argued at the beginning, Luke has a penchant for “interlocking texts,” and 18:18–23 fits this category. Remember what Lucian said about them: “When the first part is complete the second will be brought into essential connection with it, and attached like one link of chain to another; there must be no possibility of separating them” (*Hist. conser.* 55). Quintilian states there should be “a certain continuity of motion and connection of style. All its members are to be closely linked together” (*Inst.* 9.4.129). Structures constantly run the risk of deforming interpretations by illegitimately restricting manifold significant intertextual connections. On the other hand, an attempt to read without any type of structure would leave an infinite and amorphous mass of meaning.²³

As stated at the beginning, structures both respond to properties in texts and are imputed to texts based on certain readings. This means that structures should not be viewed as static but three-dimensional. It is not a stable class but a dynamic ensemble of correlations, and it may be that interpreters should be less interested in a single correct structure and rather should be open to discovering different types of intertextual relationships. Binary models of structure do more to restrict than to open up our readings. A more eclectic approach to structures may be beneficial since they are a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. Recognizing multiple structures does not mean texts become meaningless but rather opens them up to multiple intertextual and author-directed intentions. The problem is not that we have structures, but that we have sometimes perceived them in only one way.

In this way, both the two missionary journey and three missionary journey models are legitimate, but also reveal unique theological points about Luke's writing. They challenge one another not to view things too lopsidedly or with too many assumptions going unchallenged.

²³ This language is summarizing Kynes, *An Obituary for "Wisdom Literature,"* 112.