A Stumble Forward?

William Hamblin


ISSN 1050-7930 (print), 2168-3719 (online)


A Stumble Forward?

Reviewed by William Hamblin

This is a seriously flawed book which nonetheless opens up an interesting new approach to the study of Book of Mormon geography. In chapters 1 through 3 Hauck presents some methodological background to the study of the geography of the Book of Mormon. Chapter 4 is in a sense the heart of Hauck’s book, where he offers some new interpretations of several Book of Mormon geographical features and terms. Hauck’s views will be, to say the least, highly controversial. For example, he claims that northward, eastward, and southward are technical terms in the Book of Mormon for northwest, northeast and southeast respectively. For Hauck the narrow neck of land is not an isthmus, but a type of “coastal corridor” (p. 35). This theory necessitates the existence of two “lands of Bountiful,” one by the east sea and one by the west sea. Some of these novel ideas will be discussed in detail below. In chapters 5 through 8 Hauck offers what I feel is the most useful part of his book. Here he devises abstract models and charts symbolizing textual references to geographical relationships mentioned in the Book of Mormon. This, too, will be further described below. Hauck then takes the final step of attempting to correlate his abstract diagrams with the actual topography of Mesoamerica in chapters 9 and 10. Since these chapters are based on several dubious assumptions, I find this section of his work completely unconvincing, as I will describe below. His book concludes with Appendices detailing some technical methodological considerations, and lists and tables of geographical data from the Book of Mormon.

I feel there are several major problems with Hauck’s study. First is his irksome lack of references and bibliography to the important work of previous studies on Book of Mormon geography. Perhaps the worst example of this is on pages 21-22, where he lists twelve “facts” which he feels have been established about Book of Mormon geography. Not only does he fail to provide references to modern studies for any of these twelve “facts” (and nearly all of them have received modern
attention), he does not even provide references to passages in the Book of Mormon which could be used to establish his "facts."

A related problem is Hauck's failure to come to grips with John Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. This is strange, for Hauck has read Sorenson's work, saying that it "has established the cultural correlation of Book of Mormon peoples with the ancient inhabitants of southern Mesoamerica" (p.2). But Hauck never mentions the fact that Sorenson's work also provides a model for direct correlation between Book of Mormon geography and specific sites in ancient Mesoamerica. Now it may indeed be that Sorenson's geographical correlations are wrong, as they must be if Hauck's theories are to be accepted. But if Hauck wishes his theories to receive serious attention he must not only present his ideas, but show where Sorenson's geographical correlations are flawed and his own are superior. This he never does. He seems to simply present his opinions as if in an intellectual vacuum.

Hauck also makes some grandiose, but totally unsubstantiated claims for his work. For example, "For the first time since its publication in 1830, the Book of Mormon has been successfully used to predict the location on the American continent of ancient ruins described within its pages" (p.1). Good news indeed! But who predicted it? Where is the modern location? What Book of Mormon site is referred to? Who conducted the archaeological dig? What professional journal published the analysis? Who reviewed the findings? Hauck does not even grace his claim with a footnote! Indeed, all we find is that "informal archaeological investigations have identified a series of large, fortified settlements in specific geographical locations described in the Book of Mormon" (p. 3). In other words, Hauck apparently went driving through Mexico or Guatemala, found some ruins, and has declared them to be from Nephite times. I do not want to be hypercritical, but I am frankly tired of this sort of thing being passed off on the Latter-day Saints as serious Book of Mormon scholarship. If Hauck has made a significant archaeological find, let him describe it in a detailed paper, submit it to peer review, and publish his specific findings and analysis for critical appraisal. Undoubtedly he intends to do so, but until he does, he has gone beyond the pale of responsible scholarship in making assertions such as he does.

Hauck's work is also flawed by additional methodological failings. Perhaps the major problem in this regard is that his
arguments frequently run backward, from general assumptions to specific interpretations. He presents his assumptions, then attempts to demonstrate how specific geographical references can be interpreted to match those assumptions. However, he often fails to show how specific texts can be used to prove his general assumptions. I will deal in detail with two major examples of this phenomenon.

Hauck insists that "A careful reading of all the references in the text concerning [the directions] north-northward, south-southward, and east-eastward establishes that all six are never used as interchangeable directions. This means that these six terms are not six ways of defining three cardinal directions, but rather six different points of the compass…. Logic suggests therefore that since northward, southward and eastward are not identical with the cardinal directions, they must be the intermediate quadrants at 45 degrees between the cardinal points of the compass" (p. 30). He goes on to insist that northward is northwest, eastward is northeast, and southward is southeast (p. 31).

There are several serious problems with this interpretation. Hauck simply claims that "a careful reading" establishes his idea, without quoting the text of a single passage from the Book of Mormon. Careful reading is something quite different from analysis and proof, neither of which Hauck provides. (Indeed, my "careful reading" of the text suggests that northward, southward and eastward refer simply to general directions. Northward means in a general northerly direction, sometimes to the northeast, and at other times perhaps to the northwest.) Next he claims that since "all six are never used as interchangeable directions" they must refer to "six different points of the compass." I find this lapse of logic little short of incredible. It is one thing to show that northward is never used to mean eastward. I'm glad the Book of Mormon never makes this serious error. It is quite another matter to conclude thereby that northward is a single specific direction on our modern compass. Despite the serious, if not fatal weaknesses in Hauck's interpretation of this point, his entire reconstruction of Book of Mormon geography is based on the premise that this claim is true.

Another very dubious assumption in Hauck's work is that there are two lands of Bountiful. Hauck claims that "the numerous references to the land of Bountiful ... demonstrate the existence of two very separate and contemporary entities both
given the name Bountiful” (pp. 31-32). Although Hauck does provide a list of references to passages in the Book of Mormon mentioning Bountiful, he does not provide a single quotation or analysis of any of these texts. Here is the core of his discussion. “References including Alma 22:29-33; 50:11, 32; 63; Helaman 4:5-8; and 3 Nephi 3:22-24 all correlate the land Bountiful with the adjacent land Desolation and the west sea. On the other hand, there are references that correlate the land of Bountiful with the adjacent land of Jershon and the east sea (Alma 27:22; 51:26-32; 52:9, 15, 18, 39; 53:3; Helaman 1:28-29; 5:14-16). The spatial associations given in these references are always consistent. The places associated with the east sea Bountiful, including the city of Bountiful, are never mixed with the references and places associated with the west sea Bountiful” (p.32).

Hauck’s last sentence is manifestly false. His very first reference is to Alma 22:29-33. Let’s see what the text says. “And also there were many Lamanites on the east by the seashore, whither the Nephites had driven them. And thus the Nephites were nearly surrounded by the Lamanites; nevertheless the Nephites had taken possession of all the northern parts of the land bordering on the wilderness, at the head of the river Sidon, from the east to the west, round about on the wilderness side; on the north, even until they came to the land which they called Bountiful” (29). This text seems to associate Bountiful with the east sea. After saying that Bountiful bordered Desolation, and was called Bountiful because of its wildlife, the text continues: “And now, it was only the distance of a day and a half’s journey for a Nephite, on the line Bountiful and the land Desolation, from the east to the west sea; and thus the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla were nearly surrounded by water, there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward. And it came to pass that the Nephites had inhabited the land Bountiful, even from the east unto the west sea” (32-33). Now Hauck maintains that the text does not explicitly state that Bountiful extended from the east sea to the west sea, but only from an indefinite east to the west sea (pp. 38-39; emphasis added in above quotes). Let us grant him this point, which could be seen as ambiguous. Nevertheless, verse 29 seems to be linking Bountiful to “the east by the seashore,” while verse 33 relates Bountiful to the west sea. Likewise, Alma 50:8-11, Hauck’s second reference, discusses the geography of the lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful, referring to the east sea in
verse 8, and the west sea in verse 11. Alma 50:32-34, talks of the lands Bountiful and Desolation, “by the sea, on the west and on the east.”

A very simple geographical theory can account for all the information in these passages. The land Bountiful is near the narrow neck of land, and extends to or near the east sea and the west sea. Just as there is no reason to conclude that there are two separate countries both called the United States of America simply because the United States borders both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, there is no reason to conclude that there must be two lands of Bountiful simply because the text sometimes refers to Bountiful as being near the west sea, and sometimes near the east sea. Yet Hauck provides no reason to reject this clear and simple reconstruction of Book of Mormon geography, despite the fact that he himself believes that “Veracity lies with the concept that has the greatest clarity and simplicity, is most consistent, and correlates best with all the other supporting geographic information in the text” (p. 35). Why is his two-Bountiful theory superior to the one-Bountiful theory? What geographical problems does it solve? What types of geographical relationships does it clarify? How does it make the narrative of the text more clear and consistent? Hauck never even begins to provide an answer.

But let us grant Hauck the benefit of every doubt. The best one could say is that by various manipulations and strained interpretations one could argue that the text might be referring to two different places. But one could never conclude, as Hauck insists, that “The places associated with the east sea Bountiful, including the city of Bountiful, are never mixed with the references and places associated with the west sea Bountiful” (p.32). This claim is simply false. However one wishes to interpret the passage, the references to Bountiful, the east sea, and the west sea are quite manifestly mixed in the texts quoted above. The problems with his theory are further compounded by the fact that it requires that a single body of water be given two different names: he identifies the Pacific Ocean as being both the south sea and the west sea (p. 107).

Thus, in my opinion Hauck’s interpretation of the technical nature of direction terminology and his claim for the existence of two lands of Bountiful are not only very weak but quite evidently false. If these two major assumptions are invalid his entire geographical reconstruction must be rejected. Then why not simply ignore the book entirely?
I believe some benefit can be derived from a study of chapters 5 through 8 (pp. 41-116), in which Hauck proceeds to develop abstract diagrams symbolizing the textual geographical information of the Book of Mormon. For example, if the text describes a journey from Zarahemla to Bountiful, Hauck maps out this “path” indicating rivers, valleys, and additional features claimed in the text to have existed between Zarahemla and Bountiful (p. 50). After all the smaller paths have been diagramed, they are combined into larger abstract “networks” as more geographical links are found connecting locations together. The end result could have been a geographical encyclopedia of abstract diagrams representing the geographical information from the Book of Mormon.

Unfortunately, however, Hauck’s method of presentation limits the usefulness of his diagrams. First, he usually identifies the sites by number rather than name, making it difficult to keep the sites straight in one’s mind and necessitating continual flipping through the pages to find the names of the sites. He seldom includes the references or the text from the Book of Mormon which he used to develop his diagram. Thus again, one must flip through the text and charts in Appendices to determine what specific phrase is being used to establish a particular point on his diagram. He also fails to distinguish between explicit and implicit interpretations of textual references. Finally he limits his geographical information to natural features, making little reference to cultural characteristics such as walls and towers which can be of vital importance in eventually correlating the abstract diagrams with the actual terrain in Mesoamerica. Thus, all in all, his material is not well organized to serve as a reference source for students of the Book of Mormon. Nonetheless, these chapters of his book offer an interesting way to approach the study of Book of Mormon geography. Ultimately I feel that it would be extremely useful at this point in the study of Book of Mormon geography to have a detailed toponymic and geographical dictionary of the Book of Mormon, with full page abstract diagrams illustrating all known geographical data for each Book of Mormon site, along with references and complete texts from the Book of Mormon, linguistic analysis of the names, and references to possible Mesoamerican correlations.

In summary, the most generous review I can give is that Hauck has shown that much of the geographical material contained in the Book of Mormon is somewhat ambiguous.
This, however, should be obvious to anyone who has seriously studied the text. Unfortunately, Hauck has not expressed his eccentric theories in terms of the inherent ambiguity of the geographical references in the text, but in terms of a near certainty which he has by no means demonstrated. His work on developing abstract charts and diagrams illustrating textual references of geographical relationships could have been an important step forward in Book of Mormon geographic studies. Unfortunately, the serious problems with his work make it a stumble rather than a lengthened stride.