

# Four Quarters

Diane E. Wirth,  
Steven L. Olsen

*Mosiah 27:6 “abroad upon the face of the earth, yea, on the north and on the south, on the east and on the west, building large cities and villages in all quarters of the land”*

Book of Mormon writers commonly spoke of their land as being divided into four quarters (i.e., Mosiah 27:6; Alma 43:26; 52:10; 56:1; 58:30). They similarly thought of the earth as being divided into four quadrants (i.e., 1 Nephi 19:16; 22:25; 2 Nephi 10:8; 21:12; 3 Nephi 5:24; 5:26; 16:5; Ether 13:11). Accordingly they described each area of their lands by reference to the cardinal directions, such as “the land northward” and “the land southward.” Recent research by Diane E. Wirth, pursuing a topic explored earlier by Steven L. Olsen, shows that similar ideas existed in pre-Columbian America and the Old World.<sup>1</sup>

Good evidence exists that ancient Americans divided their territorial lands into four quadrants for administrative purposes. For example, the Inca had four governors, each presiding over a quarter of the state: “This makes a striking parallel to the administration in other high cultures in the Old World where the kingdom was divided into four provinces linked with the cardinal points.”<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to keep the traditions of their fathers alive, the Nahua and Maya nations established four rulers, four governors, or four chiefs, each responsible for one quadrant of land.<sup>3</sup> “In Mexico we find that the four executive officers were the chiefs or representatives of the four quarters of the City of Mexico. . . . The entire dominion of Mexico was also divided into four equal quarters, the rule administration of which was attended to by four lords. . . . The Spaniards also found in Cuzco [Peru] a large, beautifully-polished stone-cross which evidently symbolized, as in Mexico, the four quarters.”<sup>4</sup>

In Guatemala, records speak of “four nations, four provinces, four capitals, [and] four Tullans.”<sup>5</sup> Mesoamerican accounts of their ancestry told that they descended from seven tribes (as in Jacob 1:13) who came from across the sea, but only four were considered fundamental.

Additionally, these records likewise envisioned the world and the heavens divided into quadrants. The Mayan *Lord of Totonicapan* speaks of “the four parts of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Mesoamerican art commonly portrays four godlike creatures (*bacabs* and/or *chacs*) holding up the four corners of the earth and sky. Likewise, Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras Historicas* I, and Sahagun, as Bruce Warren reports, refer to the seas surrounding central Mexico as the Seas South (SW near Oaxaca), the Sea North (NE by Tampico), the Sea East (SE near Tabasco), and the Sea West (NW around Puerto Vallarta).

Similar references from the Old World can be cited. Cities such as Ebla and Jerusalem were divided into quarters, and the ancient Egyptian determinative glyph for “city” was a circle divided diagonally into four quarters.

In the Bible, the immediate land is divided into quarters (see, i.e., Joshua 15:5; 18:14-15; Isaiah 47:15; 56:11; Mark 1:45; Acts 9:32). Likewise, the heavens (see Jeremiah 49:36) and the earth (see Genesis 19:4; Revelation

7:1; 20:8) are seen in quadrants. In Egyptian texts, four beings or creatures often depicted the four cardinal points of the earth. Commenting on these figures, represented as canopic jars on the Lady Meux Hypocephalus, Budge explained: "These jars were under the protection of Isis, Nephthys, Neith and Serqet, and represented the south, north, east and west respectively."<sup>7</sup>

How the land was divided could vary in Mesoamerica. *North* rarely referred to true north. It often meant a direction about eighteen degrees east of true north, apparently based on the solstitial axis. A significant example of this comes from Río Azul, Guatemala, where a Mayan tomb has been found with the directional glyphs painted on the walls and oriented about eighteen degrees east of the cardinal points.<sup>8</sup>

Such may have been the conceptual base for the frequent use of the intercardinal point, depicted at forty-five degrees (as in the famous Aztec Calendar Stone), which we would call *northeast*.

Correspondingly, the Anhuac region south of Mexico City was divided into Northeastern, Southeastern, Southwestern, and Northwestern quadrants (as in Jerusalem). Tombs, buildings, and plazas were often oriented toward directions other than the cardinals; and the heavens could be oriented differently from the earth.

These points may bear on several further aspects of the Book of Mormon. For example, some ancients thought of the north as dark and sinister; correspondingly, the Nephites called the land northward the Land of Desolation. As above, the Nephite generals Helaman, Teancum, and Moroni (see Alma 46-58) may have had separate quarters of the land under their command. In a Mesoamerican fashion, the Nephite "north" need not have been oriented toward our precise north.

While further research is warranted, apparently the traditions of the "four," which are more or less present in many cultures, were strongly represented in both the Old and the New worlds, including the Book of Mormon. Knowledge of this world view may help us in understanding these records.

*Based on research by Diane E. Wirth and Steven L. Olsen, August 1986. More recently, see Appendix C to John L. Sorenson, "The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1990), on directions in the Book of Mormon.*

### Footnotes

1. Steven L. Olsen, "Cosmic Urban Symbolism in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 23 (1983): 87.
2. Ake Hultkrantz, *The Religions of the American Indians*, trans. Setterwall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 187.
3. Ralph L. Roys, *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 139 n. 5.
4. Zelia Nuttall, *The Fundamental Principles of Old and New World Civilizations* 2, Archaeological and Ethnological Papers of the Peabody Museum-Harvard University (Salem, Massachusetts: Salem Press, 1901), 75, 136.
5. *Ibid.*, 494.

6. English version by Delia Goetz, *Lords of Totoncapan* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), 169.

7. E. Wallis Budge, *Gods of the Egyptians, or Studies in Egyptian Mythology* 1 (1904/rpt. 1969): 210.  
Compare Joseph Smith's comments on the four figures on Facsimile 1, Figs. 4-7, and on Facsimile No. 2, Fig. 6, of the Book of Abraham that represent "this earth in its four quarters."

8. See Ian Graham, "Looters Rob Graves and History," *National Geographic* 169 (April 1986): 456.