My colleague, J. Scott Miller, a professor of Japanese at Brigham Young University, related the following story:

Immediately after graduating from BYU I spent some time as a graduate research fellow at a Japanese university. During that time I inherited an advisor who . . . had great interests in philosophy and music (he had a grand piano in his tiny office, around which we would conduct our conversations). One day we were discussing the concept of space when he suddenly played a first, then a second note on the piano.

“What do you hear?” he asked.

“A fifth,” I replied.

“No, what are you listening to?” he inquired more earnestly, playing the notes again.

“Two notes,” I responded, puzzled.

“That is precisely the point. You hear the notes. We Japanese hear the silence in between. Westerners focus on what is there, Asians focus on what is not.” (Maeser’s Edge, 12/6:1, emphasis in original)

Many of us read Isaiah’s words like Westerners hear musical notes. We grasp the literal sense of the language but fail to perceive the imagery behind the words. We are fully aware of the obvious—the two notes of music—but unaware of what exists beyond the apparent. For example, some read “cedars of Lebanon” and “oaks of Bashan” (Isaiah 2:12–13) and see only trees in their mind’s eye. They do not recognize the symbolism of tall cedars and oaks representing proud people. Or some read “idols of gold” (Isaiah 2:20) and see only man-made statues. They do not realize that idols may signify any kind of false worship.

The book of Isaiah cannot be read like a newspaper, a letter, or a textbook. Symbolism is a key element of Isaiah’s text. It is part of every chapter and almost every verse. Through revelation, Isaiah drew upon the social, cultural, religious, and political background of the day to produce hundreds of different symbols. His symbols pertain to various aspects of life in the Holy Land: he wrote of the natural world, including animals, insects, plants, rocks, elements, and objects in the sky; he mentioned colors, numbers, foods, armor, and weaponry; he referred to persons, occupations, ecclesiastical offices, social relationships, and human anatomy; and he wrote of places and architecture.

This volume is not a scholarly work but is designed as an introduction to Isaiah for readers of all ages—families, students, teachers. Children can gain entry into the world of Isaiah through the pictures, and youth and adults through both commentary and
pictures. The “How to Use This Book” section that follows describes how this book is organized.

It is hoped that the photographs, illustrations, and maps will enable readers of all ages to more easily visualize many of Isaiah’s teachings and prophecies. The photograph of a pruning hook (page 118) serves as an example. The pruning hook is a metal, knifelike instrument with a short, broad blade attached to a wooden handle. It is used for pruning vines and harvesting grapes. The pruning hook is similar to a spearhead, which also has a short, broad blade attached to a wooden handle. After viewing the photograph of the pruning hook, one can more easily comprehend how a spearhead can be beaten with a hammer and reshaped into a pruning hook. Isaiah’s prophecy, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks” (Isaiah 2:4) takes on new meaning.

All but two or three of the photographs presented in this book were taken in the Holy Land. It seemed proper that the photos originate from Isaiah’s homeland and surrounding regions. Though much has changed in the Holy Land since Isaiah prophesied and ministered more than 2,700 years ago, a great deal remains the same. Shepherds gather their sheep into sheepfolds; grass grows on the rooftops of some dwellings; farmers use beasts of burden to plow their fields; olive trees grow throughout the Judean hills; donkeys pull carts loaded with goods; ancient watchtowers rise into the sky; Bedouin pitch their tents and ride camels; and the cities of Jerusalem, Damascus, and Bethlehem remain. The wilderness of Judea, the Sea of Galilee, and other prominent geographical features of the Holy Land have changed little since Isaiah’s time, and the same is fundamentally true of the Holy Land’s plants and animals. The photographs, taken in the Holy Land, attempt to capture as closely as possible the world Isaiah experienced during his ministry and drew upon as he wrote. If a person knows no more about Isaiah than what is presented here, he or she will have a good basic overview of some of the main religious concepts.

Below: Sheep near Bethphage. A black sheep, upper left, strays from the flock.