In this chapter I wish to set aside the issue of the historicity of the historiographer’s account, and focus instead on what can be gleaned from the texts themselves through various interpretative methods. In my opinion, what we read there about the prophets’ behavior, their methods of operation, and the people’s attitudes toward them can tell us much about the nature of the religion at the time and about the religious milieu. To put it another way, since the man of God was seen as God’s representative, the attitude toward him echoes the people’s idea of God Himself. If the prophet acted in mysterious ways, his figure secretive and intimidating and all contact with him was deemed potentially fatal, so too must God have been perceived by the believers.

The backdrop for the events described in all prophetic stories in the Book of Kings is the northern kingdom. This being the case, it follows that either the author was familiar with northern religious customs as described, or these represented his ideas about the customs of the northern kingdom. By “ideas” I mean not only the information preserved from the past, but also the author’s subjective interpretations of the religious customs of the North. In other words, I do not entirely rule out the possibility that a significant part of the elements describing the northern religious customs were invented by the author or based on preconceived ideas or on popular descriptions built up in various traditions before reaching him.\(^1\) By “characteristics” I do not mean the plot line or course of the narrative, but the setting’s implicit attributes.\(^2\) Since specific characteristics appear repeatedly in many of the prophetic stories as incidental to the main theme, or only read

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\(^2\) Of recent sources, see: N. Rösel, “The Emergence of Ancient Israel: Some Related Problems,” *BN* 114/115 (2002) pp. 151–160 and bibliography there. As is widely known, it was de Wette who first pointed out that the editing of the books of the early prophets had been carried out by Deuteronomistic authors: W.M.L. de Wette, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, Halle 1806, reprinted 1971. See also M. Haran, ibid.
between the lines,” I am inclined to find them credible, as they are qualitatively different from the attributes arising from the descriptions in the Books of Samuel and Kings of events in the southern kingdom. We can say, therefore, that if indeed the final redaction of the books of the early prophets was the work of one man, he was conscious of the differences between the northern and southern kingdoms. If, on the other hand, more than one editor was involved, a different picture emerges, of distinct religious customs in the two kingdoms. We must also bear in mind that the descriptions of the northern kingdom in the Book of Kings (I and II) are not objective. Generally, the author’s position is decidedly “anti-northern”: northern kings are cast in a negative light as sinful leaders who incite others to sin, and the men of God confronting them represent the author’s religious-moral world outlook, and are therefore depicted as true prophets. This being the case, if the descriptions of the northern man of God are consistently different from those of his southern counterpart, this must indicate that these differences are genuine, as clearly it was not the author’s intention to portray the northern man of God as anything other than pious. That said, in some of the stories the man of God is presented somewhat ironically – indeed, in some instances, that is the central theme of the story’s ideological message. Since the author’s attitude toward the northern prophet is essentially positive, we must assume that these descriptions were not whimsical but a form of subtle criticism of conduct that deviated from the authors’ normative demands. This combination of uniquely northern attributes and ironic narrative underlines the distinctions between the religious customs of north and of south.

Of course, one cannot overlook the fact that northern prophets operated mostly during the period before written prophecy, while in the south they were mostly prophets of the written word. Evidently, in the oral tradition, over time, certain attributes of the early prophets gave way to others. Nonetheless, in this study I shall try to show that the unmistakable contrasts between northern and southern prophets are the product not just of this historical circumstance, but attest to fundamental differences between the religious climate and lifestyle in the two kingdoms.

This study is divided into two sections. In the first we review the stories that have an ironic tone to the prophets’ outlook and conduct, to gain a better understanding of the basic ideological messages behind them. In the second section we examine the characteristics of the northern man of God in detail, and compare them with those of his southern counterpart.