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## Chapter 9

# The Prayer House as Promised Land

Following the many revivals during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century more than two thousand “prayer houses” – freestanding meeting houses for religious and social activities run by lay people – were built throughout Norway. One after the other received biblical place-names such as Bethel, Bethany, Salem, and Zion. This article concerns Norwegian prayer houses and their names, with a special focus on those with Biblical place-names. It sheds light on their symbolic meaning, naming customs, and the use of names in a historical, theological, social, and cultural context. The premise of the discussion is that place-names are historical sources that convey tendencies within cultural history and the history of mentalities.

Sunday, October 18, 1914 was a celebratory day in the small coastal village of Ekerhovd on the island of Sotra, west of the city of Bergen, in Norway.<sup>1</sup> This was the consecration of Bedehuset Zion – The Prayer House Zion (Fig. 9.1). The Norwegian word *bedehus*, which translates as “prayer house,” is specific to Norway and it refers to a distinct group of houses known in Denmark, Sweden, and England as “mission halls.”<sup>2</sup> With Zion the village now had a meeting house where old and young could gather for religious and social events of different kinds. A church visit was rare. The parish church was located mid-island and it could only be reached by foot. The prayer house was a supplement to the church; it was a meeting house where the lay people themselves were in charge. In economic terms the house was a joint effort, and the house belonged to the local community. The funds were raised locally and the plot was a gift from local landowners.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Sotra is the largest of the isles belonging to the municipality of Fjell in Hordaland County. For maps, pictures and updated information see: Wikipedia, “Fjell,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fjell>.

2 Kurt E. Larsen, “De 1073 danske missionshuse, deres internationale baggrund og særpræg,” in *Vekkelsens møtesteder*, ed. Arne Bugge Amundsen (Lund: Kirkehistorisk arkiv, 2014), 105–7. In Sweden the term “bönehus” – equivalent to the Norwegian “bedehus” – designates houses/churches that belong to the independent non-Lutheran churches/congregations.

3 Thor Bernhard Tobiassen, *Huset midt i Bygda. Ekerhovd bedehus 1914–1989* (Ekerhovd: Bedehuset, 1989), 3–4, 7; Jakob Straume, *Kristenliv i Bjørgvin. Frå Selje til Sund. Eit festkrift* (Bergen: Lunde, 1952), 92–5; Odd Thormodsæter, Johann Vannes and Nils Ove Torsvik, eds., *Misjon i bedehusland. Fjell indremisjon 100 år 1896–1996* (Straume: Fjell indremisjon, 1996), 9. The number of seats is today 80, with an additional 20 seats in the gallery.

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**Fig. 9.1:** Ekerhovd Prayer House, Hordaland, Norway. Photo: Johann Vannes, 2018.

In outward appearance the prayer house did not distinguish itself as monument that architecturally marked the space, like a church would have done. It was built in wood by a local craftsman, and, apart from the somewhat larger size and larger windows, it resembled most residential homes. The name Zion was painted above the main entry, in large, Gothic script. The sources do not explain why the board of the prayer house chose this name, but today's users believe it was derived from the meaning of the word;<sup>4</sup> Zion was the name of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the place where God resided. The name made the Prayer House Zion in Ekerhovd holy and proclaimed to the world that it was a house of God, where his people came together to hear his word be preached on Sundays and weekdays. Today, it still says Zion above the main entrance, but the house is just called Ekerhovd bedehus [Ekerhovd prayer house].

## The Storyworld of Salvation

Following the nationwide revivals during the early twentieth century countless prayer houses were built, and one after the other received biblical place-names. Bethel,

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<sup>4</sup> Johann Vannes, personal correspondence, December 27, 2017, email.

Bethany, Salem, and Zion are at the top of the list, but there are also prayer houses called Emmaus, Bethlehem, Elim, Hebron, and The Plains of Mamre [Mamrelund], Sarepta, Sharon, Eben-Ezer, Ephphatha,<sup>5</sup> and Zoar, Nain, Berea, Bethesda, Sychem, Rephidim, Carmel, and Tabor, Nazareth, and Gethsemane; yes, even Pella, but never Jerusalem. These names were rooted deep in Norwegian culture. They were mentioned in churches, classrooms, and meeting houses, in hymns and devotional literature. The names – apart from the church-historical Pella – are all taken from central episodes in Salvation History, as it is developed in the Old and New Testament. In the nineteenth century, it was something of a fashion to name a place after foreign cities and states. The naming custom of the layman's movement can be regarded as an aspect of this trend. The names are not chosen out of love for the Holy Land as a geographical area as such,<sup>6</sup> but out of love for the land where the Biblical incidents took place. A beach, a farm, a homestead, a tavern might colloquially be called Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> But never a prayer house. This may indicate that the prayer house community had an ambivalent relationship to the earthly Jerusalem. It was the city Jesus wept over because its citizens had rejected and killed the prophets, and finally Messiah (Luke 19:41–44). If interpreted allegorically the city represented a negative example of the rejection of Christ.<sup>8</sup> But Jerusalem was also the city where salvation and the new kingdom of God were brought to light, in and of Jesus's death and resurrection. For the prayer-house community it was not the earthly, but the heavenly Jerusalem that was important. They looked forward to “the New Jerusalem,” that God had promised the believers at the end of the world. Even if the name Jerusalem was not used for prayer houses, the city is present in poetic and symbolically charged names such as Salem and Zion. But the use of the other place-names cannot be conceived of as independent of the Holy City. Jerusalem is the fulcrum of salvation history, and therefore also the key that opens and adds deeper meaning to the other place-names.

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5 *Ephphatha* is not a place-name but the Greek transliteration of an Aramaic word, which means “Be (thou) opened.” Christ spoke this word when healing a man who was deaf and dumb (Mark 7:34). Aramaic was the main language of Jesus and his Disciples. James Barr, “Which Language Did Jesus Speak? Some Remarks of a Semitist,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 5, no. 53 (1970), 133.

6 As claimed erroneously by Astrid Lunde, “Solglytt og Blidensol. Nasjonalromantiske villanavn i Rogaland 1906–1950,” (Master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2005), 32.

7 Kåre Magnus Holsbøvåg, “Lånte Stadnamn,” in *Romsdal Sogelag. Årsskrift 2002*, eds. Bjørn Austigard, Dag Skarstein and Rolf Strand (Molde: Romsdal Sogelag, 2002), 49–51; Leif Gjerland, *Oslonavn* (Oslo: Dreyer, 2017), 152.

8 Josef Tungland, *Sven Foldøen. “Ryfylkebispem”* (Oslo: Lunde, 1978), 63.

## On Names and Naming

This article concerns Norwegian prayer houses and their names, with a special focus on those with Biblical place-names. This naming custom is interesting as it interpolates biblical names upon the Norwegian cultural landscape and into the people's imaginary. There is a vast literature in Norwegian and Nordic languages that concerns the emissaries, the revivals, the associations, and organizations that throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries established the prayer houses and prayer house culture. But this particular naming-tradition has not been examined, to my knowledge, by neither name researchers, nor church historians, or cultural historians. The research presented in this article therefore breaks new ground. The intention is to shed light on the names of prayer houses: their symbolic meaning, naming customs, and the use of names in a given historical, theological, social, and cultural context. The premise of my discussion is that place-names are historical sources that convey tendencies within cultural history and the history of mentalities. Place-names are practical communication tools that in written or oral form identify a place, or a location. However, within onomastics – the study of proper names – there is a broad consensus that proper names are not only referential, they also convey meaning and content. Then: “A place-name not only points out a place, it also mediates a cluster of qualities and meanings attached to the place, partly valid for a single individual, partly shared by a given group.”<sup>9</sup> Place-names connect us to the past and inform us about customs, traditions, and fashions in naming; about social affiliations and the name-givers' faith, ideals, and values; they express feelings, reflect conflicts, demarcate borders, and bear witness to conquests and power relations.<sup>10</sup> To bestow a Biblical place name to a Norwegian prayer house is thus to “perform an act of signification as proper names exhibit a variety of meanings of cognitive, emotive, ideological and social character.”<sup>11</sup> The name-givers of the prayer houses chose names that already had, and might be filled with, content. The names they chose were literary,<sup>12</sup> and they were taken from a

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**9** Botolv Helleland, “Place Names and Identity,” in *Names and Identities*, eds. Botolv Helleland, Christian-Emil Ore and Solveig Wickström (Oslo Studies in Language, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2012), 100.

**10** Lewis Holloway and Phil Hubbard, *People and Places: The Extraordinary Geographies of Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2000), 3–4; Benedicta Windt, “Personnavn i litteraturen. En kort presentasjon av fagfeltet litterær onomastikk,” *Norsk litterær årbok 2006* (2006), 208–9; Oliviu Felecan, *Name and Naming. Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), XII; Inge Særheim, “Official Naming in Hå, Klepp and Time,” in *Names and Identities*, eds. Botolv Helleland, Christian-Emil Ore and Solveig Wickström (Oslo Studies in Language, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2012), 235.

**11** Thorsten Andersson, “Onomastiska Grundfrågor,” in *Den ellefte nordiske navneforskerkongressen. Sundvollen 19–23. juni, 1994*, ed. Kristoffer Kruken (Uppsala: Norna-Förlaget, 1996), 8.

**12** Ola Stemshaug, “Namnebruk i skjønnlitteraturen. Nokre metodiske synspunkt,” *Studier i nordisk filologi* (1982), 174–85; Benedicta Windt, “Personal Names and Identity in Literary Contexts,” in *Names and*

frame of reference that the nineteenth- and twentieth century Norwegians were well versed in: the Bible and the history of salvation.

There is a specific, biblical onomastic that has philological as well as anthropological and theological meaning. Biblical name-giving states something essential or characteristic regarding the object receiving the name. In the Scriptures, names and name-giving of places and persons have connotative and associative meaning, as well as semantic-etymological meaning. The names open up for secondary meanings and associations to “something” – an event or an important statement – which is worth remembering. The name is a text that refers to and plays on other biblical texts.<sup>13</sup> The knowledge of the name’s immediate textual context, and its wider biblical context, as well as its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century socio-cultural context, in addition to the experiences gained in the house that bears the name, gives birth to notions, associations, and emotions which endow the name with more than it states, in and of itself. In a circumscribed society Zion identifies a particular house. The name also bespeaks the function of the house, and it imparts meaning relative to the activities and people who frequent the Prayer House Zion.

## The Norwegian Prayer House: Background Notes

A prayer house means, in its most straightforward sense, “a house for prayer.” The term is used for freestanding meeting houses where there are religious and social activities run by individuals or local associations that are associated with national, Lutheran lay movements for foreign missions and home missions, which work within the bounds of the Lutheran state Church of Norway. In the Norwegian context, the term “prayer house” therefore has confessional implications: A prayer house – *et bedehus* – is always Lutheran. The statutes of the prayer houses confirm, more or less without exception, that all activities within and beyond the prayer house should be run “in compliance with the Evangelical Lutheran Church’s confession.” The prayer house served not only for edification, but it also aided in the fight against “sectarianism,” liberal theology, and secularization.<sup>14</sup>

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*Identities*, eds. Botolv Helleland, Christian-Emil Ore and Solveig Wickström (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2011), 278–9.

<sup>13</sup> Hertz Baltz, ed., “Name/Namengebung III,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 23 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 743–65. Herbart Marks is of the opinion that the etymological explanations in the Old Testament are very sophisticated and that they have ironic, double meanings; Herbart Marks, “Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1, no. 114 (1995): 21–42.

<sup>14</sup> Peder Simonsen Eikrem, *Bergens indremisjon gjennom 75 år. Et bidrag til Guds-rikets historie: 1863–1938* (Bergen: Bergens indremisjons forlag, 1938), 95.

The first prayer houses were built in the 1840s and 1850s,<sup>15</sup> during the decades when the modernization of Norway began in earnest; the dominance of state religion was weakened, and laypeople organized themselves in associations and national organizations for foreign- and home mission. As the lay movement gained momentum, there was a distinct rise in the number of prayer houses. Their numbers grew at a steady pace from the middle of the 1870s, and further accelerated in the first half of the twentieth century, when the home mission movement became one of Norway's most dominant popular movements. The expansion continued after World War II and reached a high point in the 1970s.

Every prayer house was formally consecrated, and there was a large attendance which also included visitors from outside the village.<sup>16</sup> All sources provide a consecration date for the individual prayer houses. The name of the prayer house was decided upon beforehand, usually by the prayer-house board, or in a members meeting.<sup>17</sup> Individuals might also have the final word.<sup>18</sup> The name-choices are not justified in the sources I have considered and they therefore appear somewhat arbitrary. It is clear that a selection of socially conventioned stock names was available. In the consecration speech of a prayer house, that was given by a specially invited guest, the speaker would often link their speech to the name of the house. If the house was reconstructed or expanded, a new consecration would follow. If a prayer house gained status as a “prayer house chapel,” it would be consecrated and fitted with church furniture, like an altar and an altar rail (often semi-circular). Some houses also saw the addition of a small church tower and a bell.<sup>19</sup>

Considering the tensions between the radical wing of the Low Church movement and the state church's clergy – the tension became particularly pronounced

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**15** The very first prayer house dates to 1837. Kristoffer Fjelde, *Det fyste bedehuset i Noreg* (Sandnes: Kristoffer Fjelde, 1995), 146.

**16** Eikrem, *Bergens indremisjon gjennom 75 år*, 95, 117; Reimunn Førsvoll, “Bedehusene i Åkra sogn. En sammenligning og vurdering av statuttene gjennom 100 år,” (Misjonshøgskolen, 2004), 27; Magne Mestad, *Haukeland Indremisjon 75 År 1904–1979* (Bergen: Indremisjonen, 1979), 18–9; Kjartan Rødland, *Nytt liv i gammalt hus. Bolstadøyri bedehus 1889–2014* (Bolstadøyri: Styret, 2014), 29; Kåre Olav Solhjell, *Huset ved vegen. Osmarka bedehus og kapell 1909–2009* (Osmarka: Osmarka bedehus og kapell, 2009), 15; Reidar Sørli, *Så kom de til Elim. Om bedehusene i Grue, Hof, Åsnes og Våler* (Våler: Reidar Sørli, 1997), 45; Ragnar Ørstavik, *Volda bedehus “Zion” 1887–1987* (Volda: Styret for Volda bedehus, 1987), 14–5.

**17** Mestad, *Haukeland Indremisjon 75 År 1904–1979*, 20.

**18** Enok Lauvås, “Bedehusmiljø. En studie av bedehusmiljøet på Lauvås,” (Oslo: University of Oslo, 1993), 6.

**19** K. Alvhheim, *Sandvikens Indremisjon Gjennom 50 År 1915–1965* (Bergen: Sandvikens Indremisjon, 1965), 11; Johannes Kleppa and Alf Henry Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Hordaland* (Bergen: Sambåndet, 2001), 24, 126, 136, 149, 174; Johannes Kleppa and Alf Henry Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Rogaland* (Bergen: Sambåndet, 2003), 157, 208; Solhjell, *Huset ved vegen*, 221; Rødland, *Nytt liv i gammalt hus*, 213; Norske kirkebygg, Nydalen kapell, accessed February 20, 2018, [http://norske-kirkebygg.origo.no/-/bulletin/show/644397\\_nydalen-kapell?ref=checkpoint](http://norske-kirkebygg.origo.no/-/bulletin/show/644397_nydalen-kapell?ref=checkpoint).

when radical groups practiced the Eucharist (Holy Communion) in private – it might come as a surprise that the parish priest, more often than not, participated and was the first to speak when a prayer house was consecrated. The visiting emissaries and local leaders were next in line. According to some accounts, the liturgy for the consecration of churches was adapted for use in prayer house consecrations.<sup>20</sup> This underscores the idea that the prayer house belonged to the whole parish as a community, not only to “the believers.”<sup>21</sup> It also reflects the rather harmonious relations between the local Low Church associations/groups, the local community, and – until 2012 – the Evangelical Lutheran state church; the Church of Norway.<sup>22</sup> Until recently, the overall majority of the Norwegian population were members of the state church, but the percentage is now dwindling.<sup>23</sup> The Low Church movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries thus operated within the national frame of Lutheranism, conventional loyalty to the church, and confessional religious instruction.

Religious education had been compulsory in elementary schools since 1739,<sup>24</sup> and from the mid-nineteenth century Bible history was increasingly emphasized at the expense of dogma. In 1858, *Bibelhistorie med lidt av kirkens historie [Bible History with some Church History]*, by Principal Volrath Vogt, was introduced into elementary

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**20** *Alterbok for Den norske kirke* (Kristiania: Beyers forlag, 1889), 149–65; Helge Fæhn, *Gudstjenestelivet i Den norske kirke. Fra reformasjonstiden til våre dager* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1994), 415–26; Sverre Jakobsen, *Feda Bedehus 100 År 1883–1983* (Feda, 1993), 6–7; Ola Storhaugen, *Røsmælen bedehus. Møteplass i 100 år 1904–2004* (Røsmælen: Styret for Røsmælen bedehus, 2004), 223; Sørliie, *Så kom de til Elim*, 232; Trygve Vasvik, *Jubileumsskrift Saron, Bryne 100 år 1878–1978* (Bryne: Saron, 1978), 244.

**21** Andreas Ropeid, “Bygda eig bedehuset,” in *Bedehuskulturen. Bedehus og bygdeliv i Ryfylke*, ed. Njål Tjeltveit (Stavanger: Dreyer, 1987), 47–9.

**22** In 2012, the original § 2 in the Norwegian Constitution of 1814 was amended, and the State of Norway is no longer a confessional state based on the Evangelical Lutheran religion. The original § 2 states: “Den evangelisk-lutterske Religion forbliver Statens offentlige Religion. De Indvaanere, der bekjende sig til den, ere forpligtede til at opdrage sine Børn i samme. . .” “The Evangelical Lutheran religion remains the State’s public religion. The inhabitants that confess to it are committed to raise their children in the same. . .” <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Stortinget-og-demokratiet/Lover-og-instrukser/Grunnloven-fra-1814>. The revised § 2 states: “Our values will remain our Christian and humanist heritage. This Constitution shall ensure democracy, a state based on the rule of law and human rights.” As a constitutional church, however, the Church of Norway still holds a privileged position compared to other religious groups/communities. According to the amendments of § 16 in 2012, it “will remain the Established Church of Norway and will as such be supported by the State.” This implies that the Church of Norway is not “free” or independent from the state in the same sense as other religious groups/communities. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1814-05-17>.

**23** Population 1900: 2 217 971; 1940: 2 832 599; 1970: 3 863 221; 2017: 5 258 317. Statistisk sentralbyrå (Statistics Norway), accessed October 11, 2017, [www.ssb.no/300132/](http://www.ssb.no/300132/). Today 3 758 070 individuals, 71, 5 % of the population, belongs to the (state) Church of Norway (2016). Statistisk sentralbyrå (Statistics Norway), accessed May 1, 2018, [www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/statstikker/kirke-kostra/aar.2018.01.05](http://www.ssb.no/kultur-og-fritid/statstikker/kirke-kostra/aar.2018.01.05).

**24** Compulsory public schooling for all children aged 7 to 15 was introduced in 1739 and revised during the 1800s.

schools [*folkeskolen*]. The first edition and all editions thereafter, contained a map of “Canaan” wherein the names of biblical places were included. Several of these biblical place-names feature as prayer house names. The book was used until the late 1960s and it has been read by millions of school children.<sup>25</sup> The map of Canaan included in the schoolbooks attests to a pre-occupation with the Holy Land, which increased during the nineteenth century. At home and in school children learnt so much about the Holy Land that some were said to believe that they lived there.<sup>26</sup> In common culture there was a biblical literacy, that is, a reading skill which consisted not only of pulling letters together to form words, but also the ability to decode the text and to understand context, symbols, and imagery.

A survey conducted in 1973, counted 2621 Lutheran prayer houses and 1658 churches and chapels belonging to the Church of Norway.<sup>27</sup> The numbers underscore the strength and prevalence of the Lutheran lay movements. This was not a marginal movement. With prayer houses and associations in town and country – yes, even in the smallest of outposts – we are faced with a popular movement that has exercised a broad religious, social, and cultural, as well as a political influence.<sup>28</sup>

The distribution of prayer houses, geographically speaking, was and still is more varied than that of churches. Some have periodically served as interim churches or chapels, thus complementing the public church. Southern and Western Norway had twice to thrice as many prayer houses than churches. Most prayer houses are found along the coast and in the countryside in villages and smaller towns. In major cities there were fewer, but larger prayer houses. More often than not they were the first and largest communal meeting houses in their respective communities.<sup>29</sup> A variety of local Lutheran associations, as well as groups in pursuit of the common good, were allowed to use the premises as long as it did not interfere with the owner’s use, and was otherwise in accordance with religious and moral conduct. In compliance with Pietistic norms and ethos, the house rules stated that playing, dancing, and the

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**25** 1889: 26 editions, 1 mill. copies. 1931: 61 editions, 2,8 mill. copies. Store norske leksikon “Volrath Vogt,” accessed March 16, 2018, [https://nbl.snl.no/Volrath\\_Vogt](https://nbl.snl.no/Volrath_Vogt). Classroom maps and biblical charts were not introduced into Norwegian schools until the 1920s. See also Chapter 19 (Erling Sandmo), 390–409.

**26** Kåre Magne Holsbøvåg, “Lånte Stadnamn,” in *Romsdal Sogelag. Årsskrift 2002*, eds. Bjørn Austigard, Dag Skarstein and Rolf Strand (Molde: Romsdal sogelag, 2002), 51.

**27** Andreas Ropeid, “Vi fant 2621 bedehus,” in *Årbok for Den norske kirke 1974* (Oslo: Kirkenes informasjonstjeneste, 1974), 74–8.

**28** An example in point: the Christiania (Oslo) Home Mission Association (1855) founded Norway’s first nursing education (1868), and they also organized social work among the poorest in the city. Bernt T. Oftestad, Tarald Rasmussen and Jan Schumacher, *Norsk kirkehistorie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2005), 206–10.

**29** E.g. Hans Torgny, *Nærbø bedehus. Eit historisk oversyn* (Nærbø: Indremisjonsforeningen, 2009), 24–9.



drinking of alcohol was prohibited. Music and instruments were subject to dispute.<sup>30</sup> Even though the lay people and the Low Church movement were staunch supporters of the politics of democratization and liberalization, political meetings and propaganda were generally not permitted. Politics divided. The source material provides examples, however, of prayer-house boards that made exceptions to this rule. In such cases, two criteria had to be met: the speaker had to hail from the village, and the speaker in question could not represent anti-Christian parties and groups.<sup>31</sup>

On an individual level, prayer-house members were of course free to engage in politics. Leading Low Church personalities served as elected mayors, members of local municipal councils (*kommunestyrrer*), and the Parliament, as well as cabinet ministers, and they represented different political parties. During the interwar period, the ideological conflicts escalated. In 1933, leading members of the lay movement in the Bergen area founded a new political party, Kristelig Folkeparti (The Christian Democrats; KrF).<sup>32</sup> KrF emphasized cultural and spiritual values and aimed to be an alternative to secularist parties. The KrF party had roots in the Low Church movement, and many of its representatives belonged to local home-mission associations and prayer-house boards. Hence, many prayer houses opened their doors to this party, despite contentions.

Since the 1990s, the number of prayer houses that have been disposed of has accelerated. They are sold and turned into private homes, shops, restaurants, churches, and so forth. Some are bought by the local community to serve as community houses. This can be explained by the centralization and depopulation of rural areas, the decreased participation in organized popular movements, the use of modern communications, and, finally, the secularization and privatization of religion which has been detrimental to communal religious life; whether in churches or prayer houses. Today young people ask what was once obvious: What does Zion mean?

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**30** Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i bedehusland. Bedehusene i Rogaland*, 17; Tone Alice Årtun, "Lekmannsrørsla og bedehusa i Ryfylke," in *Folk i Ryfylke 2011. Årbok for Ryfylkemuseet*, eds. Roy Høibo and Trygve Brandal (Sand: Ryfylkemuseet, 2011), 73.

**31** Torgny, *Nærbø bedehus*, 24–6. The municipal council as well as organizations associated with the political party Venstre [The Left] held meetings in the prayer house. Between 1908 and 1910 the board permitted lectures on trade unions and socialist politics. The radicalization of the Labour Party [Arbeiderpartiet] led to a ban on these activities in 1930.

**32** Odd Jostein Sæter, ed., *Kristelig folkepartis historie 1933–1983. Samling om verdier* (Oslo: Valo, 1985), 1–16. [www.krf.no/partiorganisasjonen/krfs-historie](http://www.krf.no/partiorganisasjonen/krfs-historie). KrF's first leader, Nils Lavik, was elected member of the Parliament just a couple of months after the party was founded. In 1945, KrF had its national breakthrough and obtained 8 representatives. For the conflicts between the lay movement/Church of Norway and the Labour party, see Nils-Ivar Agøy, *Kirken og arbeiderbevegelsen. Spenninger, skuffelser, håp. Tiden fram til 1940* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2011), 122.

## Documenting the Prayer House Movement

Local associations and prayer house boards have released numerous publications that expound upon the history of the associations and the buildings; their ownership, use, aesthetics, and architecture. They often cite primary sources such as protocols, statutes, annual reports, and account books. They may also contain oral accounts, song lyrics, plan drawings, and photographs, as well as quotes from newspapers, letters, and speeches. I have employed roughly sixty publications of this kind, and they provide knowledge of name-use, naming customs, and the interpretation of names.<sup>33</sup> The historical information contained in this body of texts concerns more than one hundred prayer houses across Norway.

Norwegian prayer houses were the subject of three books published at the turn of the twenty-first century, and I have employed these to gain an overview of the names that were/are used for prayer houses, and their frequency of use.<sup>34</sup> The material for these three books has been collected systematically and the books provide information regarding 688 Lutheran prayer houses, which are all presented by name, both past and present. The prayer houses included at the time of publication were located in the counties of Østfold (164), Rogaland (254), and Hordaland (268). These three counties have an especially high density of prayer houses, and the presence of evangelical revivalist movements and Christian organizations are strong; leaving a distinct imprint. The three books that survey the prayer houses of these counties are still considered representative. Altogether, this material demonstrates that names and name-customs were widespread geographically. This may be explained by the fact that the prayer house name-givers belonged to an organized network, and a socio-cultural space where religious journals, traveling emissaries, secretaries – as well as an association with subsidiaries<sup>35</sup> – all have contributed to promote and sustain naming customs.

## Groups of Names

The material demonstrates that naming a prayer house was common across the board, and somewhat fashionable, during the same period that name researchers

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<sup>33</sup> See bibliography.

<sup>34</sup> Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Hordaland*, 171; Kleppa and Rasmussen *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Rogaland*, 172; Kai Ørebech, *Bedehus i Østfold* (Oslo: Lunde forlag, 2006), 253.

<sup>35</sup> The Home Mission Association at Bethel (1887) in Fredrikstad instigated the building of 12 prayer houses. All were given biblical place-names. Ørebech, *Bedehus i Østfold*, 57.

have labelled “the Nordic Name-Renaissance.”<sup>36</sup> The names of prayer houses can be divided into four categories, based on the three survey books discussed above. The first and dominant category today, consists of the geographical place-name and the appellative “prayer house”.<sup>37</sup> In a circumscribed area the appellative can take on a “weak” name-character, so that the prayer house in everyday conversation becomes simply *the* Prayer House.<sup>38</sup>

The second category, which is pertinent to this article, consists of so-called transferred place-names.<sup>39</sup> The places are authentic, geographically and/or historically speaking, but the names are literary, and are taken from a written source in which they are part of a narrative context. Prayer houses with biblical place-names are mainly built in the period 1875–1950. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, 208 of 688 (approximately 30 %) prayer houses described in the survey books still had a biblical place-name.<sup>40</sup> Usually the name was, and still is, featured on an outer wall or above the entrance door. Today, it is impossible to obtain a full overview of how wide-ranging this practice once was, but there is reason to believe that many more prayer houses built before 1950 have had a biblical place-name.<sup>41</sup> The isles belonging to Fjell municipality, in which Sotra is the largest island, can serve as an indicator. In 2001, 15 of 20 (75 %) prayer houses built between 1906 and 1962 were endowed with a biblical place-name.<sup>42</sup>

The third category, which comprises 72 of the 688 (approximately 10 %) prayer houses, demonstrates great variations in names. They may, with some reserve, be grouped under the umbrella term “national romantic names”<sup>43</sup> and they include names such as Fredheim [Peace(ful) Home], Fredtun [Peace(ful) Yard], Ljosheim [Light(-filled) Home], and Tryggheim [Safe Home]. These examples may have biblical connotations when used for prayer houses, but, clearly, they have been perceived as

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**36** The term was originally coined for proper names, but several claim that place-names should also be included. Lunde, “Solglytt og blidensol,” 23–5.

**37** The common name *Bedehus* [prayer house] can be combined with, or substituted with, “*misjonshus/-senter*” [“mission house/-centre”] or “*menighetshus/-senter*” [congregation house/centre] or similar names. The latter is introduced in the 1970s and it signals co-use, and that the Church of Norway has assimilated some of the prayer houses’ diverse activities.

**38** Staffan Nyström, Eva Brylla, Märit Frädén, Mats Wahlberg and Per Vikstrand, eds. *Namn och namnforskning. Ett levande läromedel om ortnamn, personnamn och andra namn.*, Version 1 (2013–02–19), (Uppsala universitet, 2013), 11–12, [www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:606610/FULLTEXT01.pdf](http://www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:606610/FULLTEXT01.pdf). Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Hordaland*, 61; Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Rogaland*, 96, 194.

**39** Lunde, “Solglytt og blidensol,” 31.

**40** In Østfold: 43 of 176. In Rogaland: 65 of 244. In Hordaland: 100 of 268.

**41** Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Hordaland*, 5; Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Rogaland*, 5–6, 130.

**42** Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Hordaland*, 78–92; Ørebech, *Bedehus i Østfold*, 57.

**43** For a definition of the term and an overview of the names, see Lunde, “Solglytt og blidensol,” 183.

more “neutral.”<sup>44</sup> These names are used by other non-religious organizations and they also appear as names for residential villas.<sup>45</sup>

The fourth category consists of names given in memory of one or more important persons. Among 688 prayer houses only six have memorial names. All, but one, date to the period pre-1950. In an egalitarian society such as Norway this naming custom was not widespread.

## The First Prayer House Named Prayer House

Meeting houses and conventicle Christianity are like Siamese twins; they are conjoined. In the early nineteenth century, the conventicle, or the “friends,” gathered for edification in private cottages [*stuer*]. In Norwegian cities the Moravians held their meetings in larger *saler* [rooms or meeting halls] in private homes. These were named after the owner or the congregation’s leader, for example Duesalen [Due Hall] in Stavanger (1843) and Tippmannsalen [Tippmann Hall]. The Norwegian term *salen* [meeting room or hall] – in German *Betsal* – is taken from the Bible, and it alludes to the place where the first Christian congregation convened for prayer after the Ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:13), and to the site where Jesus instituted the Last Supper (Matt 26, Mark 14, Luke 22).<sup>46</sup>

The first assembly house that was officially named a “prayer house,” was inaugurated in the trading town of Skien, on September 1, 1850, in conjunction with a revival that would become divisive in the Church of Norway a few years later. The term prayer house must have been new and unknown. In the journal *For Fattig og Rig* [*For the Poor and the Rich*] the reporter notes that *forsamlingshus* [assembly house] would be a more appropriate designation considering the purpose of the building.<sup>47</sup> *Forsamlingshus* [assembly house] was the common name for this type of freestanding house, which could also be called “a meeting house,” “a gathering house,” “an edification house,” and “a cottage” [*stue*].<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Sørli, *Så kom de til Elim*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> In terms of percentage the county of Østfold has most names in this third category (32 of 176 prayer houses). When the numbers are compared for the counties of Rogaland (20 of 244) and Hordaland (20 of 268) they may indicate a difference in culture and mentality.

<sup>46</sup> Ola Rudvin, *Indremisjonsselskapets historie. Den norske Lutherstiftelse 1868–1891*, vol. 1 (Oslo: Lutherstiftelsen, 1967), 173, n. 9; Carsten Hansteen, *Kristiania indremisjon 1855–1904. Et festskrift til femtiårsjubilæet* (Kristiania: Foreningen for indre mission i Kristiania, 1905), 60; Bjarne Kvam, *Nytt liv på gammel grunn. Stavanger indremisjon gjennom 75 år 1876–1951* (Stavanger: Stavanger indremisjon, 1951), 52.

<sup>47</sup> Jacob J. Solgaard, *Bedehuset ‘Hauges Minde’ Skien. 75 Aars Jubileum 1850–1925* (Skien: Skiens Indremisjon, 1925), 11.

<sup>48</sup> *Stue* [cottage] is an abbreviation of *bondestue* [farmer’s cottage], *skolestue* [school cottage] and probably also *kirkestue* [church cottage]. *Kirkestuer* [church cottages] were small houses right by

The appellative “prayer house” is used in the Bible about the Temple in Jerusalem (Isa 56:7, Matt 21:13, Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46). Using the term “prayer house” thus identified the Norwegian prayer house as a house of God, and it reminded people about what Jesus himself said his house should be.<sup>49</sup> This term is associated especially with the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. In light of this story the term may be understood as a critique of the church, but, more importantly, it also points to the human need for conversion and concentration on the inner, spiritual life.

The vicar in Skien, Gustav A. Lammers (1802–1878), was one of the great revival preachers of the 1850s.<sup>50</sup> In his opinion the Norwegian state church needed to be cleansed of dead faith and rote Christianity. The new religious life could only be awakened by preaching penitence and conversion. This new life would unfold in the assembly of the faithful, who now received their own house (Isa 56:7). The prayer house should be a house for God’s people, where the boundary between the faithful and the infidels would not be blurred. The house, which henceforth was called *Vennesamfunnets bedehus* [The Prayer House of the Community of Friends], gave material form to the invisible boundary between the two groups. The name signalizes a circumscribed, intimate community, based on voluntary participation, not convention. The name included and excluded. In December 1850, the journal *For Fattig og Rig* [For the Poor and the Rich] could report to their 30 000 subscribers that there was a large influx of people to the vicar’s weekly Bible study. According to the reporter, those who came had been taught by Mary to yearn for the “the one needful thing” (Luke 10:38–42); that is, to detach oneself from “worldly pursuits” in order to sit by Jesus’s feet and listen to his word – also in a hectic everyday life.<sup>51</sup> Half a century later, Betania [Bethany] would become one of the most popular names for a prayer house. The name alludes to the prayer house as a home where Christ speaks to his congregation through the person who preaches His Word. The congregation is hence comparable to Mary, who, contrary to her busy sister Martha, sat by Jesus’s feet and listened to his teachings like a disciple.

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the church, and they were found all over the country. In these cottages people who had travelled far could change their clothes, and eat before and after the service. The prayer house in Skien is supposedly the fourth prayer house that was built. Arne Berge, “Bedehus og misjonsforening,” in *Bedehuskulturen. Bedehus og bygdeliv i Ryfylke*, ed. Njål Tjeltveit (Stavanger: Dreyer, 1987), 11–6; Johan Veka, *Glytt frå kristenliv i Rogaland. Gamal og ny tid* (Stavanger: Dreyer, 1952), 86; Arne Lund, “Herre lutherske bedehus. En flyttedokumentasjon 2004/2005,” in *Bamble historielag. Årbok 2005* (Bamble: Bamble historielag, 2005), 157.

<sup>49</sup> Kvam, *Nytt liv på gammel grunn*, 131.

<sup>50</sup> Rudvin, *Indremisjonsselskapets historie*, 166–72; Oftestad, Rasmussen and Schumacher, *Norsk kirkehistorie*, 198, 206, 211; Solgaard, *Bedehuset ‘Hauges Minde’ Skien. 75 Aars Jubileum 1850–1925*, 11–2.

<sup>51</sup> Anonymous, *Bedehuset Hauges Minde og Skien indremisjon 100 år 1850–1950* (Skien: Skien indremisjon, 1950), 32; Solgaard, *Bedehuset ‘Hauges Minde’ Skien. 75 Aars Jubileum 1850–1925*, 12. See also Store norske leksikon, “Honoratus Halling,” accessed March 28, 2018, [https://snl.no/Honoratus\\_Halling](https://snl.no/Honoratus_Halling).

In 1856, Lammers broke with the Lutheran view on baptism, resigned as priest in the Norwegian state church, and established an independent congregation that practiced believers' baptism.<sup>52</sup> It was as if an earthquake shook the whole country. The religious situation in Skien was out of hand and the turbulence spread, amongst other to the northern city of Tromsø. In Skien, Lammers was replaced with a new vicar named Andreas Hauge (1815–1892). Hauge's task was to harmonize and stabilize the turbulent situation in Skien. For thirty-five years, Hauge led the town's prayer house board and home mission association. When the prayer house from the 1850s was demolished and a new one consecrated on January 11, 1903, the board's unanimous decision was to confer the name Hagues Minde [In Memory of Hauge] to the new prayer house.<sup>53</sup> The name was honorary and it signaled Hauge's high status both locally and nationally. But memories fade away. For most people, the name would function today as a label signifying the named object. There are a few more prayer houses called Hagues Minde. They are named after the father of Andreas Hauge, the farmer and lay preacher Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824),<sup>54</sup> whom towards the end of the nineteenth century had become something of a national icon.<sup>55</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth century, Hans Nielsen Hauge had caused a nationwide revival, which later revivals and the home mission movement would come to identify with.<sup>56</sup> The name-givers knew that the Haugeians [the followers of H. N. Hauge], in their day, were among those who took the initiative to build the prayer house in Skien. When the proper name was left out, it opened up for an association of the family name with both father and son. Otherwise, memorial names for prayer houses are highly unusual. The few that exist honour local donors of prayer houses, and they include the first name. Some of these have today changed names.<sup>57</sup>

On January 22, 1854, a new prayer house was inaugurated in Herre, some twenty kilometres from Skien. It was called Samlingshuset [The Gathering House],

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52 The Parliament of Norway passed the *Dissenter Act* on July 16, 1845, allowing Christian churches and congregations outside the state Church of Norway to be established. From then on Norwegians above the age of 15 were free to leave the Lutheran state church for another Christian denomination. In the 1850s, it was inconceivable that a state-church priest would go thus far as denying infant baptism and joining the non-conformists.

53 Ørebech, *Bedehus i Østfold*, 85–6; Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Hordaland*, 152.

54 One is located at H. N. Hauge's birth place in Østfold, which also houses a museum. See Muséet Hans Nielsen Hauge Minde, "Front page," accessed February 4, 2018, <http://www.haugesminde.no>.

55 See Chapter 8 (Jostein Garcia de Presno), 138–61.

56 In 1875, the Home Mission Association in Kristiania (Oslo) built a prayer house named Hagues Minde (sold 1917). See Artemisia, "Arkitektur og historie i Oslo. Hagues Minde, Olaf Ryes plass 2," accessed February 25, 2018, <http://www.artemisia.no/arc/historisk/oslo/bygninger2/olaf.ryes.plass.2.html>.

57 Kleppa and Rasmussen *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Rogaland*, 142, 147; Kleppa and Rasmussen, *Reise i Bedehusland. Bedehusene i Hordaland*, 152.

or Stua [The Cottage], but after a while it was called Herre Lutherske bedehus [The Lutheran Prayer House of Herre]. In an area known for its independent congregations, with meeting houses that from the outside could resemble a prayer house, the name was a confessional and social marker. The name change happened before 1890, when the prayer house was put to use as an interim Church.<sup>58</sup> This indicates that the term prayer house [*bedehus*] was now becoming dominant. Names used as confessional (ideological) markers are also found in Tromsø, where there was raised a prayer house which was named Det Lutherske Forsamlingshus [The Lutheran Assembly House] in 1857. The name is as strategic as the act of building the house: It was raised and named as a bulwark against the non-conformists that had acquired a meeting house the year before.<sup>59</sup>

## Sacred Geography

The first known prayer house with a biblical place-name was built in Stavanger and it was consecrated on January 5, 1875, in the presence of 2000 people. The year after, the house was expanded. It could now house 3500 people and it was consecrated again.<sup>60</sup> The instigator for this prayer house was the controversial state-church priest, revival preacher, social entrepreneur, editor, and politician Lars Oftedal (1838–1900). He had been a seamen’s priest in Cardiff (1866–1868), and had made his first preaching tour in North America in the spring of 1875.<sup>61</sup> The prayer house was named Bethania Forsamlingshus [Bethany Assembly House]. The name is a hybrid, which points to the fact that the term “prayer house” had not yet made a complete break through. Bethany housed a printing press, which Oftedal used to issue numerous publications, and the prayer house also became the base for wide-ranging philanthropic work. On the wall above the podium stood Ephesians 2:10 in gilded Gothic script: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”<sup>62</sup> From the rostrum Oftedal spoke on the passage “but one thing is needful” (Luke 10:42) to those he called “the reborn flock,” “the

<sup>58</sup> Lund, “Herre Lutherske Bedehus. En Flyttedokumentasjon 2004/2005,” 182.

<sup>59</sup> Sev Ytreberg, *Tromsø Indremission i 60 Aar* (Tromsø: Tromsø indremission, 1918), 18.

<sup>60</sup> The city had 23 500 inhabitants. See Store norske leksikon, “Stavanger – historie,” accessed March 21, 2018, [https://snl.no/Stavanger\\_-\\_historie](https://snl.no/Stavanger_-_historie).

<sup>61</sup> Berge Furre, *Soga om Lars Oftedal*, vol. 1 (Oslo: Samlaget, 1990), 84, 210, 219–20.

<sup>62</sup> From King James Bible Online, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God,” [www.kingjamesbibleonline.org](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org). The original, Norwegian Bible verse reads as follows: “Vi ere hans Værk, skabte i Kristo Jesu til gode Gjæringer, hvortil Gud forud har beredte os, at vi skulle vandre i dem.”

congregation of the saved,” and “the community of friends.”<sup>63</sup> The terminology has eschatological overtones (Rev 7:9–16). In this house of God you were uplifted, but also anchored in reality. In capital letters the reborn were reminded that faith birthed deeds in this world. Faith had practical, tangible consequences.

Bethany was only the first in a row of prayer houses and philanthropic institutions that Lars Oftedal instigated. In the New Testament, Bethany is the name of a village just outside Jerusalem. About five kilometres south of Stavanger Oftedal founded Bethlehem (1876), named after the place where Jesus was born (Luke 2:1–7). Nazareth, the name of the childhood town of Jesus (Luke 2:39), was built a few kilometres north of the city. A boathouse north-east of Stavanger was transformed into Kapernaum [Capernaum]. It was named after the fishing village at the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, which played an important role in the life of Jesus (Matt 4:13, 18:22; Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31). In 1877, Oftedal inaugurated the first of several orphanages, Bethania Vaisenhus [Bethany Orphanage].<sup>64</sup> This “home” for orphans was next door to the prayer house, and he also purchased the farm Emmaus, which would supply the orphanage with agricultural products and serve as a vacation home for children. Emmaus was located a few “furlongs off,” a fifteen-minute walk away from the city of Stavanger. It was on the short stretch between Jerusalem and Emmaus that the resurrected Christ explained to two of his disciples what the Scriptures (the Old Testament) had foretold about the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Messiah, and later revealed to them who he was (Luke 24:13–35). In 1878, Oftedal consecrated the prayer house Saron (at Bryne), which was located strategically by the new railway station and traffic hub of the fertile Jæren district, on the coast southeast of Stavanger. The placement of the house, its size *and* its name, was decided by Oftedal. In the source material this is a rare instance where the name-choice is explained. In his consecration speech he explained that the house was named after a green plain in the Holy Land. Here, he makes an explicit connection between the name and the actual landscape, but it is interpreted symbolically and it expresses a wish. He hoped that the new railway would become a means for cultivating and fertilizing the area. In addition, he hoped that the activity in the prayer house would contribute to the “edification, the expansion, and the fertility of the congregation” in the area.<sup>65</sup> The same year the prayer house Bethel on the island Finnøy, just north of Stavanger, was consecrated. While laying the foundation stone of Bethel in 1876, Lars Oftedal had spoken upon the scripture passage “my house shall be called the house of prayer” (Matt 21:13).<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> “Den gjenfødte skare,” “de frelstes menighet,” and “vennefolket.” Furre, *Soga om Lars Oftedal*, vol. 1, 193–5, 265–74.

<sup>64</sup> After the German *Waisenhaus*: *Waise*–orphan; *Haus*–house.

<sup>65</sup> “Menighetens oppbyggelse, forøkelse og frodighet.” Furre, *Soga om Lars Oftedal*, vol. 1, 330.

<sup>66</sup> Nils Ladstein Vestbø, *Bethel. Judaberg 100 år 1878–1978* (Stavanger: Tou Trykk, 1978), 9.



If you consult a biblical map it appears that Oftedal has named the prayer houses according to their placement relative to Jerusalem. It is as if he, through his choice of names, literally imprints, more or less, the geography of the Holy Land upon the cultural landscape of Jæren. Bethany in Stavanger was now the central shrine and, as such, the New Jerusalem. When Bethany was consecrated in 1876, he saw it as the fulfilment of Isaiah 54:2: “Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.”<sup>67</sup> For Oftedal and the revivalists it was a matter of “taking land” for the greater “Kingdom of God.” Naming, then, is also an act of power.

The prayer house movement must also be considered in the context of social classes. Those who joined Oftedal were people from the lower strata of society. Oftedal published a newspaper *Vestlandsposten* (1878), and this paper, added to the prayer house and the vigorous revival movement that Oftedal spearheaded, became the starting point for a political awareness that mobilized the common people; not only in the Stavanger region, but along the whole southwest coastline of Norway. Oftedal – the priest, preacher, and politician – the prayer house, and the revival gave them clout and power to influence society in their chosen direction. The prayer house, including the naming tradition, was both of the people and for the people.

## Heaven on Earth

The prayer houses were usually simple buildings. They had a longitudinal plan like a church, but instead of a choir with an altar, there was a windowless wall with a rostrum upon a podium. Many also had galleries. Originally the decorations would usually consist of framed bible verses.<sup>68</sup> Jesus’s name or a cross was often featured on the roster. This underlines the prayer houses’ focus on Scripture and the living Word; preached and read. The decoration can also be interpreted as an expansion of the prayer house’s name. Inside, in Ekerhovd’s Zion (Fig. 9.2), for example, the following text beamed towards whomever that entered: “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”<sup>69</sup> The scriptural passage is from Revelation 22:17, where the New Jerusalem descends from heaven and the individual and the community as “the bride” goes forth to meet Christ, “the

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<sup>67</sup> Furre, *Soga om Lars Oftedal*, vol. 1, 194–5. In Norwegian Isa. 54:2 reads as follows: “Udvid dit Pauluns Sted, og lad dem berede dine Boligers Gardiner, forhindre det ikke! Stræk dine Snorer ud og befest dine Nagler.”

<sup>68</sup> Paintings similar to altarpieces became more common from the 1960s and onwards.

<sup>69</sup> In Norwegian the verse reads as follows: “Aanden og Bruden siger Kom og den som hører det, sige kom! Og den som tørster, han komme og den som vil, han tage Livsens vand uforskyldt!”



**Fig. 9.2:** Interior, Ekerhovd Prayer House, Hordaland, Norway. Photo: Johann Vannes, 2018. The shields with bible verses are quite old but not original. The painting is of a more recent date.

groom.” The passage, like the preaching, is appellative. The prayer house was a consecrated and holy place that made heaven present on earth through the preaching of the Gospel. The individual was called into the Kingdom of God and the community of the faithful. Life now had a goal and there was a future on the horizon.

The prayer house was a place where heaven and earth met. This was also signaled by the frequently used name Bethel which recalled Genesis 35:15: “And Jacob called the name of the place where God spake with him, Bethel.” At the consecration of a prayer house one might use a hymn based on the story of Jacob’s dream (Gen 28): “Here is God’s house and the gate of heaven, from this place a ladder rises.”<sup>70</sup> In the dream Jacob saw a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and on it the angels of God were ascending and descending. Then the Lord appeared above it and promised Jacob that he and his descendants would receive the earth he laid upon, and that Jacob would become a blessing to the world. Both the church and the prayer house were Bethany-like places where God would, through preaching, speak to

<sup>70</sup> Magnus Brostrup Landstad: “Her er Guds hus og himlens port, herfra det går en stige,” in *Kirkesalmebog* 1869, no. 6. *Norsk Salmebok* (Stavanger: Eide, 2013), no. 552; Irene Leland, *3 bedehus på Byremo. Historie og forteljingar frå det kristne arbeidet i bygda* (Byremo: Byremo bedehus – Betania 2012), 166.

“the sleeping” and cause their spiritual awakening. Like Jacob the faithful also took part in a promise of land and blessings. In this world they were “homeless wanderers”; pilgrims who prayed to be led safely to their new and real fatherland. This also sheds light on a name such as Elim, which needed to be interpreted in its scriptural context, as an author noted.<sup>71</sup> Elim was an oasis where the Israelites camped during their long wandering in the desert, and where their longing for water and shade was stilled (Exod 15:27). In the same manner the prayer house was a “resting place” for the “descendants of the Israelites” when they were wandering towards the Promised Land. The same author further demonstrates the emotive power of the prayer house’s name. The word *Ephphatha* that was spoken by Jesus when healing a man who was deaf and dumb, means “open up,” he explains (Mark 7:31–37). It reminded him of the fact that it was at the prayer house Ephphatha he himself first spoke in public and professed his faith in public.<sup>72</sup>

## Cathedral and Home

The prayer house was the “cathedral of everyday life.”<sup>73</sup> Ekerhovd’s Zion is described in the following manner: “When you step inside the door from the hallway, the ceiling vault rises above the room and you have the feeling that you are in a place that seeks towards the sky. At the same time the wall defines clear boundaries towards the world outside. Strong, clear beams lie stoutly and protect against intrusive impressions.”<sup>74</sup> The roof had a barrel vault construction, similar to many churches. And like a church the prayer house lifted you and protected you. The prayer-house community built God’s Kingdom and regarded themselves as “the guards on Zion’s walls.” Like Nehemiah in the Old Testament, they built their temple with “sword by their side” (Exod 32:27). They fought like Elijah on Carmel, and they battled apostasy, heresy, liberal theology, secularization, and everything in society that might corrupt the church and Christian customs.<sup>75</sup> The prayer house should be “the village’s shining beacon of

<sup>71</sup> Sørli, *Så kom de til Elim*, 8–9. He writes about 25 prayer houses close to the Swedish border in Hedmark County.

<sup>72</sup> Sørli, *Så kom de til Elim*, 16–7, n.5.

<sup>73</sup> “Hverdagens katedral.” Sørli, *Så kom de til Elim*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> “Når ein stig innfor døra frå gangen, reiser takkvelvingen seg over rommet og gir ei kjensle av å vere ein stad som søker mot himmelen. Samstundes set veggene klåre grenser mot verda utanfor. Kraftig, markert tømmer ligg traust og vernar mot påtrengjande inntrykk.” Tobiassen, *Huset midt i Bygda. Ekerhovd bedehus 1914–1989*, 4.

<sup>75</sup> Anonymous, *Kristenliv i Marnar- og Audna-bygdene, Indremisjonens fellesforening gjennom 75 år* (Mandal: Samlerens boktrykkeri, 1952), 29. Leland, *3 bedehus på Byremo*, 166; Kåre Johan Hamre, *Soga til Ulvik indremisjon og bedehuset Betel* (Ulvik: Ulvik indremisjon, 1989), 117.

Christian faith, moral, and lifestyle.”<sup>76</sup> Ljosheim [Home of the Light] was not in the least an improper name for a prayer house. The name alludes to Jesus’s statement “I am the light of the world” (John 9:5) and God’s word as a lamp and a light upon the path of the faithful (Ps 119:105).

Next to Bethel, Bethany [Bethania] is the most common name for a prayer house. The name refers to the stories of the siblings Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (Luke 10: 38–42; John 11), who received Jesus and made him the centre of their home in the village of Bethany. A prayer house should be “something of a Bethany where Martha served Jesus, Mary sat by his feet and listened and Lazarus, in a spiritual sense, rose from the dead.”<sup>77</sup> This statement incorporates some of the distinctive aspects of the prayer house’s mission. Evangelization was focused on Christ’s person and actions (the second article of faith). The scripture passage from John 1:29, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” was often to be seen on prayer house walls. The prayer house was a spiritual home, where one should be revived, edified, and enter into service for the Kingdom of God.<sup>78</sup> The name Bethany reflects the Protestant emphasis on individual, fervent, and activist piety.

The name also reflects the domestic and familial ideology that became generalized in society from the 1880s and onward.<sup>79</sup> This ideology impacted the plan of the prayer house. The bourgeois home, adopted as cultural ideal, with its larger and smaller rooms, was also transferred to the prayer house wherein there was a large assembly hall, a small meeting room, a kitchen, a toilet, and a hallway. Within public religion, then, the design provided space for men’s and women’s activities according to what was understood as their specific gender characteristics. “The prayer houses should be as fine as our homes,” it was said.<sup>80</sup> Much like evangelical churches in North America, the Norwegian prayer houses also gained an aura of homely holiness and intimacy.<sup>81</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the prayer houses diversified their activities directed towards children and youth. In

76 “Være et lys for bygda for kristen tro, moral og livsstil,” Leland, *3 bedehus på Byremo*, 166.

77 “Noe av et Betania, der Marta tjente Jesus, Maria satt ved føttene hans og lyttet, og der Lasarus i åndelig mening stod opp fra de døde”; Leland, *3 bedehus på Byremo*, 163. Daniel A. Csányi, “Optima Pars. Die Auslegungsgeschichte Von Lk 10, 38–42 Bei Den Kirkchenvätern Der Ersten Vier Jahrhunderte,” *Studia Monastica* II (1960), 140; Kristin Norseth, “Herrens tjenerinner. Jomfru Maria i lutherske Norge,” In *Kirke, politikk, kultur. Festskrift til professor dr. theol. Bernt T. Oftestad på 70-årsdagen*, eds., Birger Løvlie, Kristin Norseth and Jan Schumacher (Trondheim: Tapir akademisk, 2012), 198.

78 Kvam, *Nytt liv på gammel grunn*, 90.

79 Kristin Norseth, “La os Bryte over Tvert med vor Stumhet! Kvinnens vei til myndighet i de kristelige organisasjonene 1842–1912,” (PhD diss., MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, 2007), 402–22. The reflections upon *-heim* components in Lunde are not adequate, Lunde, “Solglytt og blidensol,” 29–30.

80 “Bedehusene bør være like pene som våre hjem.” Leland, *3 bedehus på Byremo*, 166.

81 Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 146–59.

this manner the prayer house could be a “home” to which one could belong from the crib to the grave. It also became a civil arena where women and men shared the responsibilities and tasks in accordance to what was common practice in bourgeois homes. Women assumed the main responsibility for the “inner life” of the prayer house: they were in charge of the kitchen and hospitality, ran women’s associations, children’s programs, and Sunday schools, in accordance with the principle that women lead women. Men also engaged in the “inner life” as Sunday school teachers, but they were mainly responsible for the “outer life” of the prayer house. The men maintained the outside of the prayer house, they organized voluntary group efforts for maintenance, they supervised building projects and renovations, they purchased goods, and they were in charge of transportation and the heavy lifting. Leadership and preaching were also their domain. The Norwegian practices are varied, however, and sometimes surprising.<sup>82</sup> This is in part due to population distribution, and in part demographics. One aspect is conspicuous: From the late 1890s, female members had the right to vote and speak at the annual meetings of the prayer house and local association, and they could also be chosen as members of prayer-house boards and association boards.<sup>83</sup>

## Religious Naming Traditions

The naming customs are somewhat analogous to the old tradition of giving names to churches. In medieval times the churches were named first and foremost after apostles, saints, and the Virgin Mary – Vår Frue [Our Lady], Maria-kirken [Mary’s Church] – but also after the deity – Kristkirken [Christ Church], Vår Frelzers Kirke [Our Saviors Church], Trefoldighetskirken [Trinity Church].<sup>84</sup> The name choice reflects the notion of a *communio sanctorum*; that is, the Church understood as a community of the living and the dead, and the saints’ importance as protectors, intercessors, and examples for the Christian life. After the introduction of the Evangelical Lutheran faith in Denmark-Norway in 1537, the naming custom was continued, but for theological reasons saints’ names were avoided. New Lutheran churches were often named after the deity – Vår Frelzers Kirke [Our Saviors Church], Trefoldighetskirken [Trinity Church] – a naming

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<sup>82</sup> Sørli notes, for example, that a female consecrated and preached at the prayer houses in the area, already before 1940, Sørli, *Så kom de til Elim*, 232.

<sup>83</sup> Norseth, ‘La Os Bryte over Tvert Med Vor Stumhet!,’ 196.

<sup>84</sup> See “Vestfolds vakre middelalderkirker” [“The Beautiful Medieval Churches of Vestfold County”]; accessed May 15, 2018 <https://kirken.no/globalassets/bispedommer/tunsberg/dokumenter/tema-om-bispedommet/middelalderkirker-i-vestfold.pdf>.

practice which agrees with the Lutheran focus on Christ and salvation.<sup>85</sup> From 1859 to 1910, Norwegian authorities built 720 new Lutheran state churches.<sup>86</sup> Across the entire country new churches were consecrated, and the new churches were named, among other, after the apostles.<sup>87</sup> The names have cultic relevance and they signalize confessional affiliation. Separately, and in relation to each other, they create a system of meaning that outlines a theological profile and religious mentality.

This is true also for the lay movements' use of biblical place-names. In a symbolic manner the naming custom reflects the central importance of the Holy Land, and the importance that the Christian faith has had in, and for, modern Norway. It is an active use of Scripture that expresses the high status of the Bible and Bible history among the lay people. It also reflects a Biblicist orientation in an age of staunch biblical critique. In their own manner the lay people make the same hermeneutic leap as did the nineteenth-century's great Norwegian hymn writers, such as the priest Magnus Brostrup Landstad (1802–1880) and the professor of theology Elias Blix (1836–1902): they wrote the history of salvation into the Norwegian landscape and imaginary. Executing this hermeneutic leap made the history of salvation present and alive, and it also affirmed the Christian character of Norway.<sup>88</sup>

## Naming Customs and Fashionable Names

Biblical place-names were given to meeting houses not only by the Lutheran lay people's movement, but also by Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals. The support for nonconformist churches grew from the 1870s and onward, around the same time that the Norwegian layman's movement reached out to Anglo-American revival movements and organizations. The contact between North America – “the promised land” – and Norway was otherwise close due to emigration.<sup>89</sup> This indicates that this type of name-giving was not only a Norwegian or Nordic fashion, but an international one that followed in the wake of Anglo-American revivals and reformed Christendom. It is hardly a coincidence that Lars Oftedal had spent time in England and North America, where

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<sup>85</sup> Despite the considerable material concerning Norwegian churches built after the Reformation, there is only sporadic information about names. It may be that sources have been lost, but it might also be that this topic has not been examined.

<sup>86</sup> Jens Christian Eldal and Jiri Havran, *Kirker i Norge. Med historiske forbilder*, vol. 3 (Oslo: Arfo, 2002), 11–2.

<sup>87</sup> For example Mark, Peter, John, Paul, and Jacob in Oslo.

<sup>88</sup> Oftestad, Rasmussen and Schumacher, *Norsk kirkehistorie*, 206.

<sup>89</sup> Between 1830–1910, 800 000 Norwegians immigrated to America. See Jan Eivind Myhre, “Utvandring fra Norge,” accessed March 16, 2018. <http://www.norgeshistorie.no/industrialisering-og-demokrati/artikler/1537-utvandring-fra-norge.html>.

one was “taking land,” and had been giving cities and places Biblical names ever since the Pilgrim Fathers stepped on shore in the seventeenth century.<sup>90</sup>

In Norway, the names that are used are shared property between the Lutheran Low Church movements and the independent churches/congregations (Baptist, Pentecostal, the Mission Covenant Church, and so forth). If only the proper name is used, it is not always possible to determine if the venue is a Lutheran prayer house or if it belongs to an independent congregation. But Berøa [Berea] seems to be used more often among independent churches than in Lutheran contexts. The name is taken from Acts 17:10–12, which recounts that the Jews in Berea “were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” Pentecostalism came to Norway in 1906, and the Pentecostals are the only ones who use the name Filadelfia [Philadelphia] (Rev 3:7–13). Semantically this name underlines the strong emphasis on brotherhood and the equality between the true believers in the congregation. The Scripture passage, from which the name is taken, has eschatological overtones and bespeaks “the New Jerusalem,” which will soon come down from heaven. The congregation in Philadelphia was unique in guarding the word of God and they were therefore given the promise of victory. In a symbolic way the name expresses the congregation’s and the movement’s self-consciousness and religious ethos. Both this and also the name Berea reflect a critique of “the other.” As shown in the case of Tromsø, they were not alone in this.

## Family Names

The prayer house’s building type belongs to the age of popular movements and the nation building phase of Norwegian history. The layman’s movement, the temperance movement, the free-spirited youth movement, and the labour movement all influenced modern society. All of these movements built meeting houses, but none had as many as the layman’s movement. The meeting houses were similar in style and they were constructed in accordance with the building traditions of the common people.<sup>91</sup> They were undistinguishable in exterior appearance and their ground plans were similar. Only the name announced which community presided over the building. Just as “prayer house” signalized home mission and Christendom, the term *Folkets hus* [The People’s House] was used for meeting houses that belonged to the labour movement. Proper names have seldom been used for these houses. But *Folkets hus*

<sup>90</sup> For examples, see Wikipedia, “List of biblical place names in North America,” accessed May 29, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_biblical\\_place\\_names\\_in\\_North\\_America](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_biblical_place_names_in_North_America).

<sup>91</sup> Arne Lie Christensen, *Den norske byggeskikken. Hus og bolig på landsbygda fra middelalder til vår egen tid* (Oslo: Pax, 1995), 23–32.

[The People's House] and a proper name like Fremtiden [The Future] designate the movement's political and utopian profile. Ideologically the two movements were starkly opposed, especially during the years between World War I and II.

The houses of the temperance movement often had names that referred to the organization, such as for example Losjen [The Lodge], or Totalen [The Total].<sup>92</sup> Many teetotalers used prayer houses for their meetings. The layman's movement and the temperance movement engaged many of the same people. The free-spirited youth associations, which were strong in many rural communities, and which were often an ideological counter point to the pietistic layman's movement, gave their houses names of more popular, national character. They often used the controversial "free-thinkers language" of nynorsk [New Norwegian]<sup>93</sup> and chose names for their houses that were associated with nature and culture. The names Solvang [sunny, grassy mound] and Trudvang [name of the Norse God Thor's home] have been the most common, but about every fifth *ungdomshus* [youth house] have had names that end in *-heim* [home].<sup>94</sup> In 1890, when it was decided that the only meeting house in Nærbø (in Jæren) was to be called "prayer house," the temperance association and the youth association stopped using it and built their own house, Jadarheim [*Jadar* means "edge" in Old Norse].<sup>95</sup> The common name "meeting house" apparently invited to a freer use than prayer house. It is still worth noting that approximately 10% of the prayer houses in the county of Østfold use the same type of names as the free-spirited youth movement. In the layman's movement there was also a pre-occupation with the meaning of the mother tongue, considered as a language of the heart, and the idea of the nation as a *folkehjem* [the home of the people].

The names of the meeting houses are addresses that signalise organizational affiliation, purpose, and ideological profile. In this manner they mirror the religious, socio-cultural, and political tensions, as well as societal divides that occur on a macro and micro level.

<sup>92</sup> In 1906: 95 houses. Anders Halvorsen, *Det norske Totalavholdsselskap 1859–1909* (Kristiania: Det norske Totalavholdsselskap, 1909), 96.

<sup>93</sup> *Nynorsk* (literally New Norwegian) was constructed during the 1840s. It is based on spoken, regional dialects. It is one of the two written standards of the Norwegian language, the other being *Bokmål*. In 1885 the Parliament declared them official and equal. They are so close to each other linguistically that they may be regarded as "written dialects" that are completely intelligible mutually. See Språkrådet, "Norwegian: Bokmål vs. Nynorsk," accessed April 20, 2018, <http://www.sprakradet.no/Vi-og-vart/Om-oss/English-and-other-languages/English/norwegian-bokmal-vs.-nynorsk/>.

<sup>94</sup> Jan Kløvstad, "Kjært Barn," in *Ungdomshuset. Eit kultursenter i bygde-Noreg*, eds. Lillian Eltvik Dyrnes, Gunvor Hals and Jan Kløvstad (Oslo: Det norske Samlaget, 1986), 174.

<sup>95</sup> Torgny, *Nærbø bedehus*, 16–17. *Jadar* is the root of the name for the district of Jæren, in Rogaland county.



## Concluding Remarks

“If place-names did not have a meaning there would not be any point in using them.”<sup>96</sup> This is said with poetry in mind, but it is also relevant for names of meeting houses. Such a house materializes ideas that people in a given place have rallied around, in the past or in the present. The name of the house tells us about the context in which it belongs. Every prayer house was consecrated by prayer and Scripture readings. This act is comparable to baptism, in which a person – visibly and invisibly – is admitted into Christ’s earthly and heavenly body; that is, the church and congregation as a visible and invisible unity. Consecrating a prayer house is somewhat similar. A house in the local community becomes a holy place, a piece of God’s arable earth. This is made explicit when a prayer house is given a biblical place-name. When taken from Scripture the biblical names gain an intertextual and expressive function. Whether named Bethel or Bethany, the prayer house was conceived of as a place where the Triune God called individuals to convert and believe in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. To believe in Him meant taking part in the promise of blessings and an eternal fatherland. In this manner the prayer house opened up towards the Promised Land – the New Jerusalem – and it was also an oasis that could give the faithful nourishment and strength on their pilgrimage towards the eternal home. The biblical names and the common name “prayer house” sets the house, the village, and the users into a context that transcended the local and the national, the historical, and the earthly. Without biblical literacy and vital, Christian associations the names are drained of meaning – they become exotic labels for special houses – and the houses with their peculiar names become interesting cultural heritage.

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<sup>96</sup> Astri Sann Evensen, *Mellom Blåbjøllbakken og Pompeij. Stadnamn, minne og identitet i Tor Jonssons poesi* (Hovedfagsoppgave, University of Tromsø, 2007), 148.

