

The Original Intention Behind the Term "Mormon"

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ABSTRACT

Many sources claim that the term "Mormon" was originally a derogatory term that Mormons later adopted as their own. This work evaluates that claim using original sources. It also considers alternate criteria would indicate whether a term is derogatory or descriptive, such as whether outsiders used the term to insult other outsiders, whether outsiders used the term to insult insiders without relying on qualifiers to imply negative intent, and whether church leadership had adopted the term prior to the term acquiring unambiguously pejorative meanings. The first instance of the term among reviewed publications appears in January 1831 in local newspapers. The evidence seems to suggest that the etymology of the word "Mormon", as it refers to the people who follow the teachings of Joseph Smith, originally meant "disciples of the Book of Mormon" and did not carry any implied negative meaning. Prior literature suggests that the term shifted to having a derogatory use with the advent of the term "Jack Mormon" during conflicts such as the Missouri War, possibly as early as 1834.

Introduction

Over the history of Mormonism, leaders of the various [seet branches of Mormonism](#) have at times insisted on enforcing a particular name for their particular branch. This tradition is particularly strong among adherents of the Salt Lake City-based branch, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which retains the same name adopted by the original Mormon church in 1838. When various leaders of the [Utah-based seet Salt Lake City-based branch](#) attempt to enforce a particular name for the church, their argument is typically that the Lord revealed a name for the church and therefore [the church their branch](#) should use it¹⁻⁶. Many of these sources note that the term "[Mormon](#)" was created to describe those who believed in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon^{1,2,6}. The fourth verse of the 115th section of the Doctrine and Covenants maintained by the sect is often put forward as doctrinal justification for insisting that only the full name should be used to refer to the church.

"... For thus shall my church be called in the last days, even The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints..."

A secondary claim that is often repeated among believers in Mormonism and non-believers alike is that the term "Mormon" itself was originally a derogatory name that believers eventually adopted for themselves^{3,4,6,7}. Scholarly and apologetic articles tend to repeat the claim, or more neutrally note that Sidney Rigdon sought to change the name of the church in April 1834, in order to avoid being called "the Mormon church"⁸. I have yet to find any article, scholarly or not, that describes the development of the term prior to 1834 other than references to an 1833 Louisville newspaper article titled "The Mormons and the Anti-Mormons".

The claim that the term "Mormon" was originally a derogatory slur was recently reinforced on August 16, 2018, when President Russell Nelson of [the Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) declared that he had received divine revelation that [Mormons members of the church](#) should no longer use the term "Mormon" to describe themselves, ~~nor~~ [have outsiders and that outsiders should not](#) refer to them as such^{5,9}. As one point of justification, Nelson cited the claim that the term was originally derogatory and that the church should prefer the usage of the name given in revelation in 1838. Nelson later re-emphasized his view in the October 2018 General Conference when he declared that using the term "Mormon" to describe the people or the church was "a major victory for Satan".

This recent effort to rebrand the church has spurred considerable discussion among faithful [members](#) and non-believers alike. One anonymous, online commenter, /u/RatRaceSobreviviente questioned whether this claim is backed up in original sources¹⁰. I decided to [find out investigate](#).

1 Methods

Before analyzing [any](#) data, I defined what it means for a term to be derogatory, pejorative, a slur, or an insult. I refined this definition based on preliminary searches through Mormonism Unveiled¹¹, a book widely regarded as the first anti-Mormon book. I further refined my definitions through online discussions with collaborators to exclude obvious counterexamples to my proposed definitions¹². Once criteria were set, I searched an extensive database of newspaper articles found at SidneyRigdon.com, narrowing my search stepwise until I arrived at the earliest uses of the terms. Through this, I collected

examples of the terms being used. This approach is not comprehensive, though it will tend toward higher sampling rates toward the origin of the term, allowing for grounded discussion of the early development of the term.

1.1 Criteria for Calling a Term "Derogatory"

A term is derogatory, pejorative, a slur, or an insult (hereafter, just "derogatory") when it [the term](#) implies negative meaning independent of any surrounding words that qualify its meaning. A derogatory term may or may not be used alongside qualifiers, causing for a gray area when interpreting meanings in a passage. In usage, two key criteria are used to definitively declare the usage of a term derogatory. First, if the term is used by an outsider to refer to another outsider in an insulting way, the term is unambiguously derogatory. Second, if the term is used by an outsider to refer to an insider, has no qualifiers alongside it, and still conveys a negative meaning, it is unambiguously derogatory.

For example, the term "Molly Mormon" is [unambiguously derogatory, whether it is used by insiders or outsiders](#) derogatory. "Jack Mormon" is another term that is derogatory, but its modern use is usually limited to insiders referring to other insiders. These terms are also used occasionally by outsiders with no qualifiers to imply a certain meaning, satisfying the second criteria to determine whether a term is derogatory.

A term is not derogatory, pejorative, a slur, or an insult when it is used as a descriptive term for a group, even if the perception of that group is strongly negative. There are three key criteria used to definitively identify if the usage of a term is "descriptive". First, if the term exists due to a lack of alternate names provided by insiders for use by outsiders, the term is descriptive. Second, if the name of any unrelated religious group could be replaced in the sentence with no change in meaning, then the use is descriptive. Third, if the term is adopted by insiders to refer to themselves, rather than rejected, then the term is descriptive.

For example, the term "millennials" is a term coined to describe a segment of the population born between certain years. Millennials did not get together and decide on a name, and the name created for them was for the purpose of having a recognizable identifier by which to refer to them. Even though many news articles and other publications report very negative attitudes toward millennials, the term itself is not derogatory. Another example is a sentence such as 'Mormons have strange beliefs, and a certain degree of credulity is required to accept them.' The term "Mormon" could be replaced with "Scientologist", "Jew", "Quaker", "Catholic", "Buddhist", or any other religion and the sentiment of the sentence would not change. While the tone in this sentence is decidedly negative, the religious term in this context is definitively descriptive because the term itself does not carry any negative meaning independent of the sentence. As a final example, the term "Quaker" is descriptive, but its origins were likely pejorative. The name derived from a sermon by George Fox when he was summoned before Gervase Bennet. Fox later wrote, "[Bennet] was the first that called us Quakers, because I bade them tremble at the word of the Lord."¹³ While the original usage of the term was intended to ridicule the admonition, the Society of Friends quickly adopted it as their own. Over very little time, their acceptance of the term overshadowed any previous malice intended. Today, the religious group is viewed relatively neutrally.

Where there is gray area is when there is a term that is descriptive but is also viewed as offensive by insiders when it is used to describe them. [In this case, preference is given to the term being descriptive, though I personally view it as immoral to continue to use the term when a group has asked to self-identify in a different way.](#) This grey area is most salient when the general public recognizes a shortened name or alternate name, but does not recognize an obscure, formal name or when the formal name is too generic to distinguish the described group from other groups that share the same formal name. In both cases, when the general public uses the term, the intention is to identify, not insult or denigrate, and therefore the use of the term viewed as offensive by insiders is descriptive and derogatory. While the term may be pejorative to the point of view of an insider, it is descriptive from the point of view of an outsider.

For example, the term "Jonestown" is unambiguously descriptive to an outsider, despite referring to a universally reviled religious group. However, one could imagine an insider would take offense to this characterization, who might instead prefer the official name of "The People's Temple Agricultural Project". In this case, the term could be both descriptive and derogatory. A key consideration is whether "Jonestown" is used by outsiders to insult other outsiders. Since the [term is typically not used in this way, the term is considered a descriptive one.](#)

[As another example, the term "Campbellite" was considered derogatory by members of the Church of Christ ¹⁴, as they had a doctrine extremely similar to the one found in the Book of Mormon that a church by a particular person's name is the church of that individual. Therefore, to a Campbellite, individuals should be called by the appellation "Christian" and nothing else. The problem with this doctrinal demand is that the terms "Christian" and "Church of Christ" are shared by a wide variety of religions ¹⁵, and the demand cannot be reasonably accommodated without a significant impediment to communication.](#)

In this research, I default to the perspective of the outsider unless there is an unambiguously negative meaning implied by the term, but note that the use of the term is insensitive in this case. This decision is due to the fact that extremely obscure or generic names cause significant impediment to communication and therefore outsiders using these are likely doing so out of necessity rather than malice.

An important consideration when analyzing sources is how words can shift meaning over time. If a term is derogatory at one point in time, it may not be at an earlier or later point in time. For this analysis, only the earliest meanings are important to the question of whether the term "Mormon" originated as a derogatory term. Therefore, the conclusions will be based on the earliest uses, and will not explore whether the term was used in a derogatory sense later in time. [In each of the examples above, I laid out the criteria for classifying descriptive and derogatory terms.](#) The above examples show general agreement with standard lists of religious slurs^{16–18}.

1.2 Method for Searching Early Sources

I began my initial search by using an online search engine using various phrases, such as "the first use of the word Mormon" and "the earliest example of Mormon as a term for the church". After refining the search terms, I found an online forum claiming that the earliest use was in 1833 in a Louisville Daily Herald article titled "the Mormons and the Anti-Mormons". This article suggests that the term is unambiguously descriptive, since the term "anti-Mormons" is also used to describe their enemies, suggesting an attempt at balanced reporting.

In this search, I found that the term "Mormonite" was used interchangeably with "Mormon" until sometime around 1834 or 1835. I did not search for the last use of this term. As a result, I used the term "Mormonite" alongside "Mormon" and "Mormonism".

I then checked the Google n-gram viewer, and noted that there were two very large spikes in the usage of the terms "Mormon" and "Mormonism" in 1834 and 1842 respectively. After searching a bit more, I found that these corresponded with the publication of *Mormonism Unveiled* (1834) and *Mormonism Exposed* (1842). *Mormonism Unveiled* is widely regarded as the first anti-Mormon book. It brought together all the sources from the previous five years and proposed not only a scathing review of the beliefs, but proposed the first coherent [theory as to the true authorship](#) [naturalistic theory for the authorship](#) of the Book of Mormon.

I then searched through the first half of *Mormonism Unveiled*, stopping at every instance of the word "Mormon", "Mormonite", or "Mormonism" that did not come after the words "Book of". I cataloged these into a document and categorized each excerpt as descriptive or derogatory, refining my criteria [as I went into](#) [as needed, eventually resulting in](#) the criteria presented above. I stopped halfway through the book for two reasons. First, I had sufficiently sampled the book for uses. Second, I came across an account by Martin Harris and another account by Sidney Rigdon that indicates uses of the terms [much](#) earlier than 1833. I decided to search for the earliest reference. The Martin Harris reference was dated 1832.

I was directed to SidneyRigdon.com, which contains an extensive collection of early newspaper articles relating to Mormonism printed around the world. Using this database of thousands of complete articles, I searched for any instances of "Mormon", "Mormonite", or "Mormonism" that predated 1833. In my search, I excluded any uses of "Mormon" that referred directly to the book or the [Nephite eponymous character](#) from the book. When I found a date earlier than 1833, I used that new date to refine my search. I continued this search, step-wise, until I converged on the earliest references to these terms in the database.

1.3 Limitations to the Approach

There are several limitations to my approach. First, I am relying on a database of newspaper articles. While it is extensive, it is possible that some articles are missing from the collection. As a result, I cannot conclude that my results are exhaustive. Second, because I am drawing exclusively from published sources, I will not be able to capture sentiments expressed in casual conversations between acquaintances at the time. Consequently, it is possible that a term may be derogatory in casual speech, but descriptive in newspaper sources. Third, my criteria for derogatory terms may not be shared by others. It is possible that references that I do not see as derogatory may be viewed so by others. However, as a former insider and a current outsider to the Mormon faith, I believe I am uniquely positioned to see both points of view [from as objectively as possible](#).

2 Results

The earliest use of the term "Mormon" [in the reviewed articles](#) to describe a member of the church occurred in January 1831. In reviewing articles from 1829 to 1831, no one outside the church even seemed aware that there was a Mormon church from April 1830 to October 1830, when Sidney Rigdon started proselyting in and around Kirtland. Even then, the articles treated these activities as book sales, not proselyting missions, until November [or December](#) of 1830. I found no uses of the terms "Mormonite" or "Mormonism" in 1830. Every reference to "Mormon" in 1830 referred to the Book of Mormon or Mormon, the [Nephite eponymous character](#). Every article from 1829 to November of 1830 in the database focused exclusively on the publication and content of the Book of Mormon. This includes newspapers from Palmyra, where the church was founded. [Many articles were published by Joseph Smith or other church leaders, always reproducing sections of the book, in what appears to be an effort to promote the book. All other articles were reviews of the book. This is significant because it shows that not even Joseph Smith was actively promoting the church he had founded in its first year and therefore no name was associated with](#)

the church in the public mind. All the public efforts by leaders of the church were toward selling the Book of Mormon. This includes Sidney Rigdon's mission from October 1830 to sometime in 1831, which was to sell copies of the Book of Mormon. From an outsider's perspective, the only thing anyone knew was that Joseph Smith was selling a book that he claimed had divine origins. All reviewed articles were one of two types. The first were reproductions of the Book of Mormon provided by Joseph Smith directly in an apparent effort to promote the book, as seems common at the time. All other articles were reviews of the book. These were overwhelmingly negative, but criticisms were generally directed either at the content of the book or at Joseph's character directly. No mention of an organized body of believers was found in the articles until the origin of the term "Mormonite" in January 1831. This is significant because it shows that the public efforts of church leadership were focused on selling the Book of Mormon, not establishing a church or a name for that church. This includes Sidney Rigdon's mission from October 1830 to sometime in 1831, which was to sell copies of the Book of Mormon. No one knew seemed to know there was a church, let alone a name for the church, or even a name for the people who believed in the Book of Mormon.

In November 1830, several newspapers out of Palmyra, New York; Rochester, New York; and Painesville, Ohio started reporting on traveling persons who were selling the Book of Mormon and hosting sermons and debates on the book. Most of these ministers are unnamed in the articles, but Sidney Rigdon is at times mentioned by name. In all these articles, long descriptive phrases are used instead of any nicknames. The first instance of any abbreviated description was published on December 25, 1830¹⁹. The relevant section is quoted in full, bold emphasis mine.

Book of Mormon. – In the 2d number of the GEM, we gave a full length portrait of this bantling of wickedness and credulity. By a late Painesville, Ohio paper, we perceive that this pretended revelation from heaven has found some believers, and that there are preachers travelling about in those parts who pretend that it is the only revelation which men can safely live and die [by]. In Canandaigua, it is also said, that there is **a book of Mormon preacher**, who is attempting to push his way forward, in spite of all opposition. The reason for these efforts is obvious¹⁹.

In this instance, we see the first occurrence of a preacher who is identified by the Book of Mormon, rather than simply being referred to with the more generic term "preacher". Just three days later, this term morphed again. On December 28, 1830, the *Rochester Republican*, also in Rochester, New York, published an article on the same missionary efforts. The relevant section is quoted in full, bold emphasis mine.

Book of Mormon. – Most of our readers, we presume, have heard of this pretended revelation, made to a certain few in and about Palmyra, revealing the fundamentals of a new religion. A ridiculous story was told about its discovery, golden plates were found in a stone box, a Mr. Somebody who could neither read nor write, was found able to translate them, and somebody else, equally ignorant, to transcribe them, and a worthy, honest but credulous farmer was found willing to be ruined by defraying the expense of publishing the Book of Mormon, as was to be expected, fell dead-born from the press. Here it was supposed the matter would rest, without causing even a sneer at the expense of the revelators. This however seems not to be the case. **The disciples of Mormon** have recently appeared in Ohio, and are propagating their new light with extraordinary rapidity, going to the credulous, and laying the foundations broad and wide for a "New Jerusalem" about to be built; and now it seems the oracle has commenced its responses nearer home. Surely it was not rightly said that "in that hour the Heathen oracles became dumb for ever." On Thursday of last week one of these **seers of Mormon** appeared in Canandaigua, delivered a discourse, and avowed his full belief that the book was a revelation from God, and of equal authenticity with the Old and New Testament. What number of hearers he had we are not informed, but for the honor of intelligent man, we hope and trust his followers are and will be "few and far between." This matter must be the ne plus ultra of fanaticism and delusion. If men will go beyond this in belief, verily there can be no end to their credulity²⁰.

In this passage, the meaning has shifted from "a preacher of the Book of Mormon" to "a disciple of [the book of] Mormon. Twenty-one days later on January 18, 1831, an article is published in Painesville, Ohio, a large town near Kirtland. This is the first instance of the term "Mormonism" I could find.

Mormonism. – A young gentleman by the name of Whitmer arrived here last week from Manchester, N. Y., the seat of wonders, with a new batch of revelations from God, as he pretended, which have just been communicated to Joseph Smith^{21,22}.

This article is again describing the early missionary efforts of the church. It is also the first instance I am aware of I discovered that uses the term "Mormonism" to describe the set of beliefs espoused by these new preachers. In this instance, the term "Mormonism" is clearly descriptive of the religion, and not derogatory in any way, despite the negative tone of the article. This is further reinforced by the clear publication context leading up to this article which focused on the missionary efforts and

those selling the Book of Mormon. Indeed, based on this alone, we should expect that the term "Mormonite" will come to mean "a disciple of the Book of Mormon". Subsequent articles confirm this hypothesis.

A Painesville newspaper reproduced a letter to the editor. In it, the editor used the term "Mormonite" where the reader used the term "Gold Bible converts", showing that the term was an editorial creation. This is the first appearance of the term "Mormonite" in the reviewed articles (bold emphasis mine).

We have received a long letter from a gentleman of respectability from Painesville, Ohio, respecting the conduct of the "**Mormonites**" in that state. We shall publish a synopsis of it in our next...

We have an article in type, copied from the Painesville Telegraph, which from want of room has been excluded from this day's paper detailing some account of the **Mormonites** in the state of Ohio, it will appear in our next.

Waterloo, Jan. 26, 1831.

Mr. Editor: –

Elder S. Rigdon left this village on Monday morning last in the stage, for the "Holy Land," where all the "**Gold Bible**" **converts**, have recently received a written commandment from God, through Jo Smith, junior, to repair with all convenient speed after selling off the[ir] property. This command was at first resisted by such as had property, (the brethren from the neighboring counties being all assembled by special summons,) but after a night of fasting, prayer and trial, they all consented to obey the holy messenger. – Rigdon has for some time past been arranging matters with Smith for the final departure of the faithful for the "far west." The man of many CREEDS, (Rigdon) appears to possess colloquial powers to a considerable degree, and before leaving this vicinity left us his blessing. He delivered a discourse at the Court House immediately preceding his departure, wherein he depicted in strong language, the want of "charity and brotherly love" among the prevailing sects and denominations of professing christians, and sorry I am to admit, that he had too much truth on his side with regard to this particular. After denouncing dreadful vengeance on the whole state of New-York, and this village in particular, and recommending to all such as wished to flee from "the wrath to come," to follow him beyond the "western waters," he took his leave. The Prophet, Spouse, and whole "holy family" (as they style themselves,) will follow Rigdon, so soon as their deluded or hypocritical followers, shall be able to dispose of what little real property they possess in this region; one farm (Whitmers) was sold a few days ago for \$ 2,300. Their first place of destination is understood to be a few miles west of Painesville, Ohio, (the present place of the Elder's residence) which is just within the east bounds of this new land of promise, which extends from thence to the Pacific Ocean, embracing a territory of 1500 miles in extent, from north to south.

Yours respectfully,

[name withheld]²³

Note that other papers had called the Book of Mormon the "Gold Bible" long before this article, but I point out this article because it refers to the converts of the Book of Mormon by the name "Gold Bible converts". This underscores the evolution of the term "Mormon".

In this article, we see that the news is still regarding the documenting missionary activities, and the term "Mormonite" was coined to describe them on account of their belief in the Book of Mormon. Despite these articles being generally negative toward the message of these missionaries, the usage of these terms is unambiguously descriptive. This is especially reinforced by the fact that the Mormon church at the time had not even made significant efforts to call itself a church yet , as will be demonstrated later. Additionally, the official name of the Mormon church at the time was "church of Christ", a name shared by many, many other churches, including the Campbellites: the collection of contemporary formally known as Churches of Christ, more commonly known as the Campbellites¹⁴

2.1 Articles Shortly After the Terms Were Coined

On February 5, 1831, a newspaper from Utica, New York, wrote a review of the new religion.

I said 'region of fanatics,' for the like has not occurred since the days of the Crusaders to redeem the holy Sepulchre. Hundreds, in this vicinity, have become fanatics, complete – call themselves apostles, prophets, &c. – perform miracles – call down fire from heaven – impart the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands, and say that they shall be renovated and live a thousand years. The old women say that they shall again become young, and become fruitful and replenish the earth. They have all things in common, and dispense with the marriage covenant. **They assume the general name of Mormonites.** They have a new bible which they call the Book of Mormon. Many have joined from whom we might expect better things.²⁴

This article asserts that the members of the church called themselves Mormonites. While we cannot treat this claim as authoritative, it reflects the notion at the time that Mormons were self-identifying as Mormons.

[Alexander Campbell wrote a pamphlet²⁵ reviewing the Book of Mormon that included the newly minted term "Mormonite" and published it on February 7, 1831. This pamphlet was frequently republished, including on August 14, 1832 by Joshua Himes to persuade Boston converts away from Mormonism.](#)

...Such is an analysis of the book of Mormon, the bible of the Mormonites...

...Paul says these things were secrets and unknown until his time; but Smith makes Nephi say the same things 600 years before Paul was converted! One of the two is a false prophet. Mormonites, take your choice!...

...But he [the writer of the book of Mormon] is better skilled in the controversies in New York than in the geography or history of Judea. He makes John baptize in the village of Bethabara, (page 22) and say Jesus was born in Jerusalem, p. 240. Great must be the faith of the Mormonites in this new bible!!!...

...Let the children of Mormon ponder well, if yet reason remains with them, the following passage from Isaiah 44;...²⁵

These particular passages are clearly negative, but again only show a descriptive use of the term "Mormonite". For clarity, compare this with the subsequent reprinting a little more than a year later in Boston.

Mormonism

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed and done among the **Mormonites**, it seems good to me also (having had knowledge of many things from the beginning) to testify to my brethren of mankind, that they may know something certainly concerning these wonderful people.

... However, about two days after, Mr. R. was persuaded to tempt God by asking this sign, which he knew to be contrary to his revealed will; he received a sign, and was convinced that Mormonism was true and divine. Wherefore, to make use of his own reasoning, we presume the Devil appeared to him in the form of an angel of light...

...They say much about working miracles, and pretend to have that power. Cowdery and his fellows, essayed to work several while they tarried in Kirtland, one in particular, the circumstances of which I had from the **Mormonites** themselves. It was a young female who had been confined to her bed for two years – they prayed over her, laying on hands, and commanded her in the name of Jesus Christ to rise up and walk; however, no effect appeared until the next day, when she was persuaded to leave her couch and attempt to walk. She arose, walked three or four steps, (which they told as a miracle) she then almost fainted, and was assisted back to her bed from which she's not since arisen. But as all their miracles have proved to be a mere sham, to speak vulgarly, the **Mormonites** have endeavored to save the credit of their prophets, by declaring that they never pronounced these people whole but only prayed for them – but when confronted by one of the disciples in Kirtland upon the instance just mentioned, as it was so public they could not deny it, one of them said that he did not know but Cowdery did command her to arise, but if he did it was in a laughing, jesting way!!! –

Another of the **Mormonites** said Cowdery did not command her to arise, but merely asked her why she did not arise...

...Now, courteous reader, I have given a simple statement of facts for the purpose that you might not be deceived by the pretensions of these false prophets. They proclaim the ancient gospel, putting their own appendages to it. When they think it will best suit their purpose, they say nothing about the Book of Mormon, and at other times make it their chief topic. – Mr. R. said to me, since he' became a **Mormonite**, that it was no part of his religion to defend the Book of Mormon, he merely wished the people to give heed to the old revelation, to humble themselves, and enter into the privileges which it conferred upon its believing subjects. Again, there is no salvation without receiving the Book of Mormon!...

...Thirteen apostles [from the time of Jesus Christ], all, save one, sealed their testimony with their blood. So whether their religion was true or false, they proved their honesty. But **Mormonism** is to be proved from beginning to end by assertion, and this we have in whole numbers, without fractions. But we know that they cannot more roundly and positively assert than hundreds of impostors who have gone before them...

M. S. C.²⁶

Mr. Editor – I herewith send you an extract from Martindale's Dictionary of the Bible, giving an account of a sect which rose up in France. It will be acknowledged, after reading this sketch that **Mormonism** is of a more ancient date than people have imagined, so exactly does it agree in predictions, conduct, and ideas of spiritual things. The old maxim, therefore, that "there's nothing new under the sun," still holds good...

Unsigned²⁶

To the Editor of the Telegraph.

THE MORMON CHALLENGE.

The following letter was elicited by a public challenge, given by SIDNEY RIGDON on the 30th ulto. in a public meeting held in Kirtland, at which persons from different States were present, in which he defied the world to refute the divine pretensions of the Book of Mormon...

...Without further preface or apology, the letter and the answer are hereby submitted to the public, whose right it is to form their own judgments of the merits of the cause at issue. And although the various topics of argument stated below, and designed to have been urged in the refutation of **Mormonism**, have not been argued, illustrated, and applied for that purpose, through Mr. R.'s failure to make good his empty, boastful challenge, which it appears he has no intention of hazarding, for he fears the light, and therefore cautiously avoids investigation – they, nevertheless, stand as the pillars of Hercules, the insuperable barriers to the feigned pretensions of **Mormonism**, for the defence of all who do not willfully and blindly submit to become dupes of a shameless combination of unprincipled religious swindlers – whose unhallowed design is to rob the simple both of their salvation and their property.

THOMAS CAMPBELL.²⁶

Mentor, Feb 4, 1831

Mr. Sidney Rigdon:

...The sooner this investigation takes place, the better for all concerned; therefore, it is hoped you will not protract the time beyond what may justly be deemed necessary for giving sufficient publicity to the proposed discussion – say one week after your reception of this proposal to accept the challenge you have publicly given, for the vindication and eviction of the divine authorship of Mormonism, which, if your assertion be true, that there is no salvation for any that do not embrace it; and not only so, but I am credibly informed you have asserted, that even those who have lived and died in the faith and obedience of the old book, in the triumphant assurance of a glorious resurrection and a blissful immortality, may be in hell for aught you know; therefore, I say again, the sooner this matter is publicly settled, the better...

...The proposition that I have assumed, and which I mean to assume and defend against Mormonism and every other ism that has been ismed since the commencement of the Christian era, is – The all-sufficiency and the alone-sufficiency of the holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, vulgarly called the Bible, to make every intelligent believer wise to salvation, thoroughly furnished for all good works. This proposition, clearly and fully established, as I believe it most certainly can be, we have no more need for Quakerism, Shakerism, Wilkinsonianism, Buchanism, Mormonism, or any other ism, than we have for three eyes, three ears, three hands, or three feet, in order to see, hear, work, or walk...

...We shall, however, if deemed necessary, next proceed to expose the blasphemous pretensions of Mormonism, by examining both its external and internal evidences...

...We shall also show that the pretensions of Mormonism, as far as it has yet been developed, are in no wise superior to the pretensions of the first Quakers, of the French Prophets, of the Shakers, of Jemima Wilkinson, &c. That all these pretended to as high degrees of inspiration, to prophecyings, to visions, to as great humility, self-denial, devotion to God, moral purity, & spiritual perfection; declaimed as much against sin, denounced as heavy judgments against their neighbors, and against the professing world at large, for their corruptions of Christianity, &c. &c. as the Mormonites have done or can do; the two latter have also insisted as much upon the supposed duty of common property, and have spoken as certainly of the near approach of the millennium, and of their relation to that happy state, as any of the Mormonite prophets, especially the Shakers, who pretend to be

living subjects of that happy period, and who have also given us an attested record of their miraculous operations. ——— The obvious conclusion of this sixth argument is evident, that if the Mormonite prophets & teachers can show no better authority for their pretended mission and revelations than these impostors have done, we have no better authority to believe them than we have to believe their predecessors in imposition. But the dilemma is, we can't believe all, for each was exclusively right in his day, and those of them that remain are still exclusively right to this day; and if the Shakers be right, the whole world, the Mormonites themselves not excepted, are in the gall of bitterness and bonds of iniquity – quite as far from salvation as you yourself have pronounced all the sectarians on earth to be, namely, in a state of absolute damnation...

THOMAS CAMPBELL.²⁶

In March 10, 1831, news of the new religion had reached the east coast.

A clergyman of Painesville, Ohio, has given, in the Telegraph of that place, a history of the "**Mormonites, or proselytes of the Golden Bible.**" He speaks of them as fanatics and impostors, and gives the following as a specimen of their power to work miracles: –²⁷

This article, very conveniently, provides us with an outsider definition for the term "Mormonite". And, just as we expected from the previous articles, the term was used to refer to [anyone those](#) who believed in the Book of Mormon. Even if someone holds the Book of Mormon in low esteem, these uses are unambiguously descriptive and not derogatory. Specifically, we see in this that there is no use of the term other than to describe who the news is about.

Articles along these lines continued for the next few years, increasing in negativity toward the church, but maintaining the same descriptive use of the terms. I also observed an increase in the use of qualifiers to attribute negative meaning to the sentences, but failed to find any instances that used the terms in a derogatory way.

April 5, 1831, Painesville, Ohio

Died, in Kirtland on Tuesday night last, Mr. Warner Doty, aged about 29 years. The deceased was one of those who had embraced the imposition of Jo Smith, and was a victim to the delusion of **Mormonism**. He was duly commissioned after their manner, to preach, and was one of the most active and zealous in the cause. So fully did he believe in the divinity of Smith, that he had been made to have full faith that he should live a thousand years – this he confessed to a near relative some four weeks before his decease...^{28,29}

August 31, 1831, New York, New York

...You have heard of MORMONISM – who has not? Paragraph has followed paragraph in the newspapers, recounting the movements, detailing their opinions and surprising distant readers with the traits of a singularly new religious sect which had its origin in this state. Mormonism is the latest device of roguery, ingenuity, ignorance and religious excitement combined, and acting on materials prepared by those who ought to know better. It is one of the mental exhalations of Western New York...³⁰

September 16, 1831, Jacksonville, Illinois

The Mormonites. – A Preacher of this sect visited us last Saturday. We heard a part of his lecture, which occupied more than two hours...

...This we were told was performed to admiration, and now, as the result, we have a book which the speaker informed us was **the Mormon Bible** – a book second to no other – without which the holy bible, he seemed to think, would be of little use...

...As far as we are acquainted with the Bible we now have, we are satisfied that **the Mormonites** are a deluded sect of men, whose doctrines are not only dangerous – but, notwithstanding all their professions, they are calling down the curse of God on their own heads. ³¹

September 1831, Cincinnati, Ohio

...The fact that a sect of fanatics, **calling themselves Mormonites**, have sprung up and extended themselves in the western part of New York and the eastern part of Ohio, is partially known to our readers. The origin, character and numbers of this sect have not yet been noticed in the Gazette, and, it seems proper now to notice them...³²

October 6, 1831, Ravenna, Ohio

We shall commence next week the publication of several numbers on the subject of **Mormonism** – being an exposition of that delusion, by Rev Mr. [Ezra] Booth, who as many of our readers are aware, about a year since embraced their faith, but has recently become convinced of their hypocrisy, and has publicly withdrawn from them.³³

November 10, 1831, Springfield, Illinois

The fact that a sect of fanatics, **calling themselves Mormonites**, have sprung up and extended themselves in the western part of New York and the eastern part of Ohio, is partially known to our readers. The origin, character and numbers of this sect have not yet been noticed in the Gazette, and, it seems proper now to notice them...³⁴

January 5, 1832, Springfield, Illinois

The Mormon delusion. – By information from the west, some are falling off, as well as others uniting with Joe Smith, the head man from Palmyra. One who has lately left them by the name of Henry [sic - Erza?] Booth, of Portage county, Ohio, is publishing in the Ohio Star an expose of their diabolical pretensions and impositions. They pretend an ability, as in ancient times, to speak with tongues; and that Smith is able to hold converse with celestial spirits whenever he pleases. One of them pretends to have received a commission to preach the gospel, directly from heaven on a piece of parchment; another to have received his on the palm of his hand; and witnesses are found to attest to these lies. Visions are in great repute. One who has seen the New Jerusalem, and passed through its apartments, &c. The ten tribes of Israel are locked up, they say, by the ice of the North Pole, where they enjoy the society of Elisha and John; and by and by the ice is to give way, and then they are to return to their own land. Such are some of their absurdities which this young man is exposing.³⁵

May 1832, Rock Spring, Illinois

Some days since **several Mormonite preachers**, in their peregrinations, passed through this and the adjoining counties...

A Mr. McMahan, a pious and respectable man, & a Methodist local preacher, was so bewildered with their new bible, and their power to work miracles, as to follow them to Shoal creek where he got baptized into **the Mormon faith**, and received from them a commission to preach and work miracles in turn. After one or two ineffectual attempts with his neighbors, he became entirely deranged in which exercise his wife soon joined. Under the notion that they were fighting evil spirits, they commenced a frenzied attack on their house and furniture. They soon demolished a valuable time piece, a new high post bedstead, bureau, chairs, &c. and tore off the weather boarding, and broke the windows of the house. The next project was to "sacrifice" one of their children, but were interrupted by one of their neighbors interfering, who was obliged to confine this promising disciple of Mormonism in irons till he became more peaceable. He is now suffered to go at large, though still laboring under mental alienation. His wife is some better.

These sudden and apparently providential 'effects' of **Mormon faith**, has put a stop to further proselytizing in this quarter. We hope the people hereafter will be satisfied with the Bible God has given us, and the religion it reveals, without the addition of the "Book of Mormon."³⁶

July 5, 1832, Springfield Illinois

The Mormons. – A band of thirty or forty pilgrims of this delectable sect, men women and children, passed through this county a few days since, on their way to the "promised land," in Jackson county, Missouri.³⁷

2.2 Insider Uses of the Terms "Mormon", "Mormonite", and "Mormonism"

Prior to discussing insider uses of the term "Mormon" and its variations, it is important to note how the church regarded its own name prior to 1834. In early revelations by Joseph Smith, the newly formed church is called "the church of Christ"^{38,39}. This name closely mimicked the name used by Campbellite churches¹⁴. Perhaps not coincidentally, Sidney Rigdon is suspected by some critics¹¹ to have colluded with Joseph prior to Rigdon's October 1830 conversion from the Campbellites to the Mormonites due to the strong influence Rigdon appeared to have over the direction of the church after his conversion. Prior to 1834, I could find no evidence that any church leaders took issue with the term "Mormon" or any of its derivatives.

There are very few published references prior to 1838 of Mormons referring to themselves as "Mormons". I could only find two records in a non-comprehensive search, both recorded by non-Mormons describing the words of Mormon leaders. I did not make a comprehensive search of these references. The earliest reference is in March of 1831.

Martin Harris, another chief of the **Mormon** impostors, arrived here last Saturday from the bible quarry in New York. He immediately planted himself in the bar-room of the hotel, where he soon commenced reading and explaining the **Mormon** hoax, and all the dark passages from Genesis to Revelations. He told all about the gold plates, Angels, Spirits, and Jo Smith. – He had seen and handled them all, by the power of God! Curiosity soon drew around thirty or forty spectators, and all who presumed to question his blasphemous pretensions, were pronounced infidels. He was very flippant, talking fast and loud, in order that others could not interpose an opinion counter to his. Every idea that he advanced, he knew to be absolutely true, as he said, by the spirit and power of God. In fine, the bystanders had a fair specimen of the Mormon slang, in this display of one of their head men. The meeting was closed, by a request of the landlord that the prophet should remove his quarters, which he did, and declaring, that all who believed the new bible would see Christ within fifteen years, and all who did not would absolutely be destroyed and dam'd.⁴⁰

This report of Martin Harris prophesying the destruction of everyone who would not become Mormon was repeated several times, likely by Harris himself. The account was repeated later in 1834 in *Mormonism Unveiled*, adding the detail that Harris had a copy of the prophecy hung on his office wall. The prophecy is quoted as follows.

I [Martin Harris] do hereby assert and declare that in four years... every Christian shall be gathered unto **the Mormonites**, and the rest of the human race shall perish. If these things do not take place, I will hereby consent to have my hand separated from my body.¹¹

While Howe, the author of *Mormonism Unveiled*, seems to have taken great effort to gather and corroborate reliable sources, I was unable to find any earlier record of this prophecy, other than the newspaper clipping already shown. All sources I found citing the prophecy are in turn citing *Mormonism Unveiled*. It is possible that the prophecy is legitimate, and if so, Harris appears to have been using the term "Mormonite" as early as the term was coined.

It is from *Mormonism Unveiled* that we also find an outsider account of the first attempt I could find by the church to enforce a particular name for itself. In April 1834 Sidney Rigdon proposed discarding the use of the term "Mormonite" and adopting instead the name "Church of the Latter Day Saints". Importantly for the context of President Nelson's recent revelation, Rigdon did not produce any revelation supporting this change. *Mormonism Unveiled* proposed its own theory for why Rigdon proposed this move, which was to hide the movements of the church.

...Rigdon moved that they hereafter assume the title and name of the "Church of the Latter Day Saints," **discarding the name of Mormonite, which they began to consider rather a reproach**. This was carried unanimously, of course. What their particular object was in the movement, at that particular crisis, we have not been able to understand, unless for the purpose of denying, in the most positive terms, as they passed through the country, that they belonged to the sect known as Mormonites, thereby deceiving the people as to their true character, objects, and intentions. But why was not this question settled, as all others are, by a revelation.¹¹

Church records confirm this narrative. The official history of the church also supplements a nuance that a shift in the name of the church may have been underway in early 1834, prior to the official name change. On January 22, 1834, a letter from the First Presidency of the church was noted "the organization of the Church of Christ, or the Church of the Latter-day Saints...". A month later, another note read "Minutes of the Organization of the High Council of the Church of Christ of Latter-day Saints, Kirtland, February 17, 1834."⁴¹

... After prayer, the Conference proceeded to discuss the subject of names and appellations, when a motion was made by Sidney Rigdon, and seconded by Newel K. Whitney, that this church be known hereafter by the name of THE CHURCH OF THE LATTER DAY SAINTS. Appropriate remarks were delivered by some of the members, after which the motion was put by the Moderator, and passed by unanimous voice...⁴²

Under the head *Communicated* on the last page of this number, will be seen the Minutes of a Conference held by the elders of *The Church of the Latter Day Saints*, in this place on the 3rd of this month. It is now more than four years since this church was organized in these last days, and though the conferences have always shown by their minutes, that they took no other name than the name of Christ, the church has, particularly abroad, been called "*Mormonite*". As the members of this church profess a belief in the truth of the book of Mormon, the world, either out of contempt and ridicule, or to distinguish us from others, have been very lavish in bestowing the title of "*Mormonite*." Others may call *themselves* by their own, or by other names, and have the privilege of wearing them without our changing them or attempting to do so; but **we** do not accept the above title, nor shall we wear it as **our** name, though it may be lavished out upon **us** double to what it has heretofore been. And when that bitterness of

feeling, now cherished in the bosoms of those who profess to be the followers of Christ, against the church of the Latter Day Saints, shall cease to exist, and when fabrications and desipient [sic] reports concerning this society are no longer considered a virtue, it will take its rank, at least with others, and these stigma will forever sleep with their inventors... [emphasis original]⁴³

Searching church records confirms the first part of this narrative: that Mormons had begun to regard the name "Mormon" as a reproach and they sought a new name. The fact that attention to the name of the church was not given until 1834 also underscores how unimportant the issue was to early church leadership from 1830 to 1833. Even more striking, the Mormon publication on the name change provides two hypotheses for the origin of the term "Mormonite". The first is malice and the second is to identify the church from others. The delayed attention to the terms "Mormonite", "Mormon", and "Mormonism" strongly suggests that in the first three years that the term was used, Mormons themselves did not find the term offensive and understood the term to be descriptive only.

Given the historical context, I hypothesize that neither Rigdon's account nor Mormonism Unveiled strike the likely motivation for this change. Rigdon's proposal and Harris's likely use of the word "Mormonite" suggest that the term had not been offensive to them prior to 1834. However, as the news market became overwhelmingly saturated with negative press for the church, as implied in the church article, it is reasonable to hypothesize that Rigdon proposed the change to escape the negative press.

An important side note is that David Whitmer objected to the name change on the basis that it violated the name given to the church in the Book of Mormon. He recorded his thoughts on the subject in 1887. Joseph delivered a new revelation in 1838 that declared the official name of the church, the one that closely matches what the Salt Lake sect currently uses, and restored the term "Christ" to the official name.

In June, 1829, the Lord gave us the name by which we must call the church, being the same as He gave the Nephites. We obeyed His commandment, and called it THE CHURCH OF CHRIST until 1834, when, through the influence of Sydney Rigdon, the name of the church was changed to "The Church of the Latter Day Saints," dropping out the name of Christ entirely, that name which we were strictly commanded to call the church by, and which Christ by His own lips makes so plain.

Somewhat undermining Rigdon's efforts, Joseph Smith started using the term "Mormon" to describe the people of the church at least by 1839, and very frequently from 1842 onward.

20 March 1839

...Truth is "Mormonism." God is the author of it...⁴⁴

8 September 1842

...And in relation to his almost making a Mormon of yourself, it puts me in mind of the saying of Paul in his reply to Agrippa Acts chapter 26 verse 29 "I would to God that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." And I will here remark, my Dear Sir; that Mormonism, is the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ, of which I myself am not ashamed...⁴⁵

9 July 1843

Mormons can testify whether I am willing to lay down my life for a mormon. If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a mormon I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a any other denomination. — ...One [of] the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism [is] to receive truth let it come from where it may...⁴⁶

2.3 Potential Derogatory Uses of "Mormon" in Mormonism Unveiled

The tone of Mormonism Unveiled¹¹ is unquestionably hostile toward Mormonism. However, the work attempts to hold itself to what appears to be the journalism standards of the day, and thereby seems to refrain from any derogatory use of the terms "Mormon", "Mormonite", or "Mormonism". I found only 3 potential candidates out of 67 for the term being used in a derogatory way. These are reproduced below so readers may decide for themselves if the terms carry implicit meanings.

[Talking about the dates for the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem]... So much for dates, which are given by Mormon inspiration. We will give for the benefit of our readers, a specimen of Mormon inspired language.¹¹

This is the first potentially derogatory use of the term "Mormon", but it is again unclear if this is intended to convey the idea that Mormons are uninspired, that Joseph is uninspired, that the [supposed Nephite named eponymous](#) Mormon was uninspired, or that the idea of when Lehi left Jerusalem is an idea that is espoused exclusively by people who are referred to as "Mormon". Given the context and the language of the pamphlet, which goes to great lengths to discredit the authors of the Book of Mormon but deals little with the church members themselves, I think the most likely case is that the author is referring to Joseph's claim to prophetic powers alone or Mormon as being an obvious work of fiction due to the apparent lack of inspiration given to the author of the book.

We were told by Lehi that the plates should not perish, nor be dimmed by time, but our king has found it necessary, not only to revise, but to transcribe them; so much for Mormon promises.¹¹

It seems much more likely in context of discussing the sections of the Book of Mormon that this is a critique of the Mormon religion, not the Mormon individuals.

We can see no propriety in the omission by the author of the use of guns and ammunition. We think it would have been as credible as most of the events of the narrative, and would have been matter for Mormon credulity and admiration.¹¹

In this example, it is unclear if "Mormon" carries additional meaning other than being a descriptive term, despite the use of qualifiers, but it is more likely that it is purely descriptive.

Given the sheer number of uses of the terms in a descriptive way, I view these passages as possible but unlikely examples of the term "Mormon" being used in a derogatory way. This underscores that a term may be descriptive for outsiders while considered offensive by insiders.

2.4 Outsiders Using the Term to Insult other Outsiders

I did not analyze instances of the term "Mormon" or "Mormonite" being used to insult other non-Mormons. However, in the articles I reviewed from 1829 to 1833, as well as the first half of *Mormonism Unveiled*, I found no instances among the reviewed articles of "Mormon" or "Mormonite" being used by an outsider as a derogatory term for another outsider.

However, the term "Jack Mormon" was originally used to describe non-Mormon Missourians who were sympathetic to early Mormons in Missouri⁴⁷. The term is unambiguously derogatory at every point in its history and potentially indicates that the use of the term "Mormon" had acquired a derogatory meaning of its own. I found many secondary sources that made unsubstantiated claims that the term "Jack Mormon" was originated as early as 1834. These claims may be legitimate, and they would coincide with the time period that Rigdon proposed a name change. However, the term was known at latest by 1844 when a November 1st article was reprinted in Nauvoo accusing Thomas Sharp, the editor of the *Warsaw Signal*, of coining the term "Jack Mormon" to disparage non-Mormons in Clay County Missouri who were sympathetic to the early church⁴⁸.

3 Conclusion

[In this study, I searched for the earliest uses of the term "Mormon" in a stepwise process to converge on the earliest use of the term. This process samples articles closer to the origin much more heavily than articles much later. In my search,](#) I did not find any evidence of the terms "Mormon", "Mormonite", or "Mormonism" being used in a derogatory, pejorative, insulting way, or as a slur, prior to 1834, despite sharp criticism of the beliefs espoused by members of the church. Every instance of the term I found in the reviewed articles, skewing toward 1831, was unambiguously descriptive *and* did not match any of the criteria for the terms being unambiguously derogatory. The earliest instances of the terms appear prior to any public knowledge of the church existing or any formal branding efforts on the part of church leadership, and therefore the term was a necessary invention to describe the new beliefs. Together, this unambiguously defines the first uses of the terms as descriptive only. Additionally, there is no evidence of the terms carrying negative sentiment independent of qualifiers or the terms being used by outsiders as insults toward other outsiders, at least until a possible date of 1834. I found at least two attestations of church leaders using the term to describe themselves prior to 1834, suggesting that the term, which was not pejorative, was also adopted by early members to a limited degree. I found several instances of Joseph Smith using the term from 1838 onward, re-appropriating the term after it had become pejorative after the Missouri War.

In all, it seems that the terms "Mormon", "Mormonite", and "Mormonism" were originated by newspaper editors who needed a functional term for a new religion that had failed to give a name for itself. When the church later invented a long and unwieldy name to differentiate itself, the pre-existing and more convenient nickname persisted. The etymological development of the term "Mormon" strongly suggests that the original meaning of these terms was "disciples of the Book of Mormon", and nothing else. [Modern histories of the origin of the term consistently affirm this point.](#) However, the evidence overwhelmingly contradicts the claim that these terms were originally derogatory. Any potential derogatory meaning seems to have developed around 1834 at the earliest, potentially the same time as the origin of the term "Jack Mormon".

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Additional information

Competing interests /u/frogontrombone is a disaffected member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While he works hard to be dispassionate in his analysis of Mormon history, bias is inevitable, and should be acknowledged.