

# 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 would** indicate whether a term is derogatory or descriptive, such as whether outsiders used the term to insult other **outsider**, 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 sects have at times insisted on enforcing a particular name for their particular **church**. This tradition is particularly strong among adherents of the Salt Lake **City based** sect, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which retains the same name adopted by the church in 1838. When various leaders of the **Utah-based sect** 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 should use it<sup>1-6</sup>. Many of these sources note that the term was created to describe those who believed in the authenticity of the Book of Mormon<sup>1,2,6</sup>. The **forth** verse of the 115<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>3,4,6,7</sup>. 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"<sup>8</sup>. 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** should no longer use the term "Mormon" to describe themselves, **nor have outsiders refer** to them as such<sup>5,9</sup>. 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 reemphasized 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 re-brand the church has spurred considerable discussion among **faithful** and non-believers alike. One anonymous, online commenter, /u/RatRaceSobreviviente **questioned** whether this claim is backed up in original sources. I decided to **find out**.

## 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 Unveiled*<sup>10</sup>, a book widely regarded as the first anti-Mormon book. I further refined my definitions through on-line discussions with collaborators to exclude obvious counter-examples to my proposed definitions. Once criteria were set, I searched an extensive database of newspaper articles found at SidneyRigdon.com, narrowing my search step-wise 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. "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 declare the usage of a term "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."<sup>11</sup> 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 continuing 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. In this case, 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. Since the question at hand is whether the origin of the term "Mormon" was derogatory, I default to the perspective of the outsider, but note that the use of the term is insensitive in this case.

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

The above examples show general agreement with standard lists of religious slurs<sup>12-14</sup>.

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.

### 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 as 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 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 the criteria presented above. I stopped half way 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 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" 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. 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. No one knew 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, 1830 in "The Gem of Literature and Science" published in Rochester, New York. 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 obvious.

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 credulity.

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 the Painesville Telegraph, 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.

This article is again describing the early missionary efforts of the church. It is also the first instance **I am aware of** 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.

On January 26, 1831, the Painesville Telegraph reproduced a letter to the editor. In it, a new term for Mormons was coined (**bold emphasis mine**).

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]

On February 1, 1831, The Reflector, published in Palmyra, New York, published the first mention of the term "Mormonite".

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.

In this article, we see that the news **is still regarding the 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. Additionally, the official name of the Mormon church at the time was "the Church of Christ", a name shared by **many, many other churches**, including the Campbellites.

## 2.1 Articles Shortly After the Terms Were Coined

On February 3, 1831, the Le Roy Gazette, published in Le Roy, Ohio, reproduced the article printed in the Painesville Telegraph, dated January 18, cited above.

On February 5, 1831, The Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate, publishing 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.

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.

In March 10, 1831, news of the new religion had reached the east coast. the Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser, based in Baltimore Maryland, published an article on Mormonism.

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: –

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** 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 20, 1831, Rochester Daily Advertiser, Rochester, New York

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...

September 16, 1831, The Illinois Patriot, 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.

September 1831, Cincinnati Gazette, 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...

October 6, 1831, The Ohio Star, 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.

November 10, 1831, Sangamon Journal, 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...

January 5, 1832, Sangamon Journal, 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.

May 1832, The Pioneer, 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."

July 5, 1832, Sangamon Journal, 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.

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

There are very few published references prior to 1838 of Mormons referring to themselves as "Mormons". I did not make a comprehensive search of these references, but while reading through *Mormonism Unveiled*, I found a use of the term by Martin Harris from September 1832.

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.

Now, we should acknowledge freely that Martin was sort of the gullible, rich uncle of Mormonism. It is doubtful whether many members took him seriously, let alone the leadership. But what this quote underscores, however, is Harris using the term "Mormonites" in an un-ironic sense. If Harris takes this term seriously, then it stands to reason that the term was unoffensive to him, and therefore not likely offensive to a typical member at the time.

By 1834, the press was ubiquitously negative toward the church. 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.

...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.

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.

Given the historical context and having both an insider and outsider perspective, I hypothesize that neither Rigdon's account nor *Mormonism Unveiled* strike the likely motivation for this change. Rigdon's proposal and Harris's use of the word "Mormonite" suggest that Mormons had adopted the term previously, however reservedly, for self-identification. However, as the news market became overwhelmingly saturated with negative press for the church, I believe Rigdon proposed the change to escape the negative press. Rigdon showed advertising savvy during his mission in 1831 selling the new religion. And the idea that Mormons would see the negative press and conclude that their own name was held in ridicule among the rest of society would be true, even if the term were not derogatory. It would be a situation similar to the above example of Jonestown, where members of the cult would probably object to the term and the negative press about it, despite the term "Jonestown" being purely descriptive. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, April 1834 appears to be the first time that we enter the gray area between descriptive and derogatory. Prior to this, we have scattered evidence that Mormons themselves used their own nickname freely and the term was *not* considered derogatory until around that time.

Somewhat undermining Rigdon's efforts, Joseph Smith started using the term "Mormon" to describe the people of the church in 1838, at least, and very frequently from 1842 onward. This is also the year that Joseph delivered a new revelation that declared the official name of the church, the one that matches what the Salt Lake sect currently uses. While, this is the matter of a different analysis, it underscores the fact that Mormons themselves adopted the term on several occasions, but seemed to want to abandon it when they became aware of the negative press associated with the term.

## 2.3 Potential Derogatory Uses of "Mormon" in *Mormonism Unveiled*

The tone of *Mormonism Unveiled*<sup>10</sup> is unquestionably hostile toward Mormonism. However, the work attempts to hold itself to what appear 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.

[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.

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 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.

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.

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 Missouri<sup>15</sup>. The term is unambiguously derogatory at every point in its history. This usage was known by 1845, but many LDS scholars believe the term may have been coined as early as 1834, when the Missouri War was at its most intense. This is also the time frame and location from which Rigdon proposed changing the name of the church to avoid the term "Mormon". I believe the creation of the term also lends derogatory meanings to the term "Mormon". The term "Jack Mormon" has since shifted to refer to believing Mormons who do not live according to the strict lifestyle rules practiced by orthodox Mormons, but it is unclear from readily available sources when this occurred. It is likely that the claim that the term "Mormon" originally had derogatory connotations is confused with this later period when "Jack Mormon" was coined.

## 3 Conclusion

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 unweildy name to differentiate itself, the pre-existing and more convenient nickname stuck. The etymological development of the term 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.