

ON “MORMON” IN MORMON STUDIES PUBLISHING

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After arriving home during a long rainy drive from St. George on Conference Sunday last October, a headline from the *Salt Lake Tribune* on my social media feed immediately became a source of anxiety. Topping Peggy Fletcher Stack and her colleagues’ article were the words: “Members ‘offend’ Jesus and please the devil when they use the term ‘Mormon,’ President Nelson says.”¹ As a managing editor of a press focused on Mormon Studies books, the easily recognized name “Mormon” has been essential in promoting and marketing what we publish for multiple reasons, including: (1) search engine optimization for general internet searches, such as on Google, as well as book searches on Amazon and other online retailers; (2) until very recently Mormons loved to see “Mormon” in public—especially in a noncritical way—both as a recognition of their own identity and a validation of their relevance in the world; and (3) for brevity—with a single word, “Mormon” or “Mormonism” get to the point and make clear what is being referenced—there simply isn’t any other word that encapsulates the broader Mormon tradition and culture. All of these are crucial when trying to stay afloat in a publishing industry that is struggling as a whole, and in particular in the niche of Mormon Studies publishing that is seeing its once reliable customer base shrinking.

1. Peggy Fletcher Stack, Scott D. Pierce, and David Noyce, “Members ‘offend’ Jesus and please the devil when they use the term ‘Mormon,’ President Nelson says,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2018/10/07/members-offend-jesus/>.

Away from the business side of publishing, the scholarly field of Mormon Studies—of which we not only publish but of which I have also been deeply involved with as a student at Utah Valley University and Claremont Graduate University as they were launching their respective programs—covers much more than the Salt Lake City–based institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In his eulogy describing the martyrdom of the prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum Smith, Apostle (and later President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) John Taylor ended by declaring “their innocent blood on the floor of Carthage jail is a broad seal affixed to ‘Mormonism’ that cannot be rejected by any court on earth.” These words would eventually be canonized as binding scripture for Latter-day Saints in Doctrine and Covenants 135. Taylor’s use of “Mormonism” here is important because (1) it seems to be used to highlight how Joseph Smith’s legacy is much bigger than the institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and (2) this is the word that Smith himself used to describe the movement that he had begun:

The inquiry is frequently made of me, “Wherein do you differ from others in your religious views?” In reality and essence we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love. *One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.*²

I don’t care what a man’s character is, if he’s my friend, a true friend, I will be a friend to him and preach the Gospel of salvation to him, and give him good counsel, helping him out of his difficulties. *Friendship is one of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism to revolutionize and civilize the world, and cause wars and contentions to cease, and men to become friends and brothers.*³

2. Joseph Smith, quoted in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1949), 5:499.

3. Joseph Smith, quoted in *History of the Church*, 5:517.

Hell may pour forth its rage like the burning lava of mount Vesuvius, or of Etna, or of the most terrible of the burning mountains; and *yet shall Mormonism stand*. Water, fire, truth and God are all realities. *Truth is Mormonism.*⁴

That Taylor understood Joseph Smith's legacy, "Mormonism," to be much more than the institutional Church is clear from the absence of the Church in Taylor's list of the Prophet's accomplishments:

In the short space of twenty years, he has brought forth the Book of Mormon, which he translated by the gift and power of God, and has been the means of publishing it on two continents; has sent the fulness of the everlasting gospel, which it contained, to the four quarters of the earth; has brought forth the revelations and commandments which compose this book of Doctrine and Covenants, and many other wise documents and instructions for the benefit of the children of men; gathered many thousands of the Latter-day Saints, founded a great city, and left a fame and name that cannot be slain. (v. 3)

For Taylor, Mormonism began not with the restoration of what was first called the Church of Christ but with the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon. More than an institution, Mormonism was the beliefs, practices, revelations, life, and even a city that ultimately began with that book of scripture. And while Taylor most certainly did not view other churches that came out of this Mormon movement as legitimate, his yearning throughout his life for many of these other Mormon denominations to unify with the Salt Lake City-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints points to his recognition that they also were a part of Joseph Smith's Mormon legacy.

It is with John Taylor's expansive understanding of Mormonism that I propose a way for academics and other scholars to discuss both the institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its members and the broader Mormon movement in a way that respects the wishes of President Russell M. Nelson's recent request that "Mormon,"

4. Joseph Smith, quoted in *History of the Church*, 3:297.

“Mormonism,” and “LDS” not be used to reference the Church or its members.

The distinction is rather simple (but with a few caveats*):

- When referencing the broader religious culture that began with the Book of Mormon—particularly aspects of it surrounding the Salt Lake City-based LDS Church—it *is important to use language that does not imply official sanction, support, ownership, or recognition*. In these cases it is may be more appropriate to use “Mormon” or “Mormonism” and inappropriate to use the name of the Church or “Latter-day Saint.”
- For most scholarly works, authors should not use “restored Church of Jesus Christ,” as doing so affirms a theological claim and is not an official name of the LDS Church. Authors should also refrain from using “Church of Jesus Christ” to avoid confusion with the many denominations that officially use that name.
- If immediate recognition, brevity, or literary devices (such as alliteration) are essential, “Mormon” may be appropriately used in titles to reference persons as members of the LDS Church, and Mormonism may be appropriately used to reference the broader Mormon tradition, which may or may not include the institutional LDS Church. However, if possible, the text should note the request by the LDS Church’s naming preference and follow that in the text.

Some examples of appropriate and inappropriate references:

Latter-day Saint scripture / ~~Mormon~~-scripture (the LDS Standard Works)

Mormon scripture / ~~Latter-day Saint~~-scripture (the various religious texts of Mormonism in the context of Mormon culture)

Latter-day Saint doctrine / ~~Mormon~~-doctrine (official LDS teachings)

Mormon theology / ~~Latter-day Saint~~-theology (speculative beliefs based on Mormon Scripture, tradition, and LDS doctrine)—for example the work done by those involved with the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology or the Mormon Transhumanist Association would be doing Mormon theology not espousing LDS doctrine.

Latter-day Saint / ~~Mormon~~ (persons as members of the LDS Church)

Mormon / ~~Latter-day Saint~~ (persons as they identify with being part of Mormon culture or heritage)

Latter-day Saint history / ~~Mormon history~~ (official history of the LDS Church)

Mormon history / ~~Latter-day Saint history~~ (unofficial history of the LDS Church and the broader movement beginning with or leading up to the Book of Mormon)—much of the work done by those involved with the Mormon History Association or the Mormon Women’s History Initiative

Latter-day Saint culture / ~~Mormon culture~~ (aspects officially sanctioned or implicitly promoted by official policy and instruction in relation to institutional matters, organizations, and events—such as appropriate attire in LDS church meetings or the requirement to have a temple recommend for LDS Church employment)

Mormon culture / ~~Latter-day Saint culture~~ (aspects common to broader Mormon culture but without official support—such as Jell-O salads, conservative/Republican ideology, and pretty much anything and everything associated with Utah County)

Mormon Studies / ~~Latter-day Saint Studies~~ (the study of Mormonism).⁵

To end, perhaps, on a more personal note. As someone who still identifies as a Mormon but is unsure about his Latter-day Saint identity, the anathematizing (as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland put it⁶) of “Mormon” and

5. I understand that the University of Utah recently rebranded their Mormon Studies program and chair to Latter-day Saint Studies—a political decision I believe to be ill-conceived and either implicitly affirming the Salt Lake City-based Church as the legitimate expression of Mormonism or limiting the scope of its research to the branch of Mormonism led by Brigham Young and corporately continued by Russell M. Nelson.

6. “So, dear friends, when coming from our own tongues the use of ‘Mormonism’ is anathema and so is ‘Mormon’ as it pertains to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints per se.” Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Maxwell Legacy in

“Mormonism” points to something more than just a name correction or rebranding effort. Along with the dissolution of pageants, reduction of Sunday worship meetings, elimination of many extra-curricular events (such as roadshows), separation from Scouting, and more, the cursing of “Mormon” feels symptomatic of a larger and radical revisioning or reunderstanding of the Church away from its being a means of community-building and toward simply being a means of delivering ordinances. These things, more than the Word of Wisdom or temple worship, were the defining Mormon experiences of my youth. They were what made me Mormon, and my hope is that through Mormon publishing and Mormon Studies I can find a way to remain Mormon.

the 21st Century,” in *BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018 Annual Report*, 14.