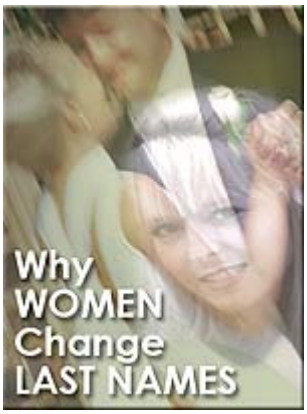
WHY BRIDES CHANGE LAST NAMES

By Laura Dawn Lewis



Brides adopt the last name of the groom. Until the 1970's feminist explosion, few questioned this. Legal documents in various states show most women (roughly eighty-five percent) continue to change names upon marriage. A smaller percentage defer to hyphenation.

But why do brides do this? Searching, several sources instruct on the process of name change, usually for a fee. The feminist contingency urges abstention for identity, financial and individualist reasons with scant information explaining why or where this tradition originates. Sociology, women's studies and history professors tapped on this issue argue the differences, exceptions and traditions of various cultures yet none offered a reason or theory regarding the origin.

Like many of life's mysteries, the answer sought becomes the answer seeking, solving itself when least expected, and in this case, where least expected, The Bible. The key reasons for a bride taking the groom's name are:

1. Protection of family and wealth
2. Designation of a new life direction
3. Acknowledgement of God's presence in and endorsement of the marriage

Let us start with the secular reason: protection of family and wealth.

WEALTH'S ROLE IN NAME CHANGES

Should a will be absent through the mid-twentieth century property, family lineage, name and items of value passed to succeeding generations via the male head of household. Women, the exception occurring within royalty succession, as second class citizens were prohibited from owning property in most countries as late as the eighteenth century; even today some cultures consider a wife the husband's property. Upon the patriarch's death with the absence of male children, the state (ruling party in control of the country, city or fiefdom) often acquired wealth, land or assets unless the wife's children bore male children or male relatives petitioned.[1] Tradition held a woman is an extension of the man therefore she and her children assumed his name. He in turn provided for her monetarily, physically and socially.

Upon the advent of nation states[2] around the seventeenth century and the perpetuation of the modern legal profession[3], legal contracts designating wealth distribution between generations standardized familial wealth transference. Today legal contracts eliminate the need for marriage as the conduit of wealth to spouses and descendents. Courts have ruled in various states that couples living together for a period of time are "married" in the eyes

Copyright © 2005 Couples Company, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

of the law, with or without a license. What once was a necessity forcing women to change names today functions as convenience. TOP

PROTECTION

Marriage insured a woman's survival during times of physical labor. Threats to her safety and life came from other men, nature or the animal kingdom. Women who did not marry found few choices for survival: governess, servant, school teacher or whore. Until recent history, families stayed within the same geographic local. Children represented a woman's 401K. Changing name and changing titled, going from "Miss Scarlet" to "Mrs. Butler" announced to the world she belonged. Accepting his name brought her instant respectability and station in society, protecting her future, present and past. TOP

MEN vs WOMEN

"All I want is my name. He can have the rest. But I want my name. I earned it."

Tina Turner at her divorce hearing from Ike Turner

Why does a woman take his name rather than he hers? Customs are habitual; traditions bestow significance and are performed for a reason. Women change their name. Men do not. Is this a custom or a tradition?

Like many customs and traditions in modern society, male before female is Biblically based. In Genesis, God creates Adam first and from Adam's rib, his companion Eve. Adam and Eve together become a new entity, **the couple**:

> Gen 21-25
> And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. TOP

Even though last names did not exist until this past millennium, Verse 24 signifies the primary meaning of a woman taking a man's name.

"(She) shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

Genesis sets the stage for God's recognition of joining man and woman as one person through the covenant of marriage. She moves to join him rather than he joining her. To God, the couple is a new being. The book of Genesis demonstrates God's intention that woman is an extension of the man, (his better half some say) created for him. He is not complete until he joins with her. The marriage covenant between man, woman and God solidifies this. The shared last name honors this oneness.

ANCIENT SIGNIFICANCE OF NAME CHANGE

Copyright © 2005 Couples Company, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Through the first 4,500 years of biblical human history, surnames rarely existed and people operated on a first name basis. Surnames didn't occur with frequency in western society until the tenth century AD or become accepted until the eleventh. Exceptions occur, generally within royalty and ruling parties, but most people were identified with their tribes, culture, city, job, position or influence: King David, Socrates, Aesop, John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene[6]. Then a person's name qualified its bearer like a business card rather than today's use of names, to identify like a serial number.

The name-change tradition premiers in the book of Genesis with Abram. Abram's name *(meaning exalted father)* is changed by God to Abraham *(meaning father of many)*, signifying his new role in service to God. TOP

> *GEN 17:3-6*
>
> *And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying. As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shall be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.*

God gave Abram a new purpose and to this new purpose a new title, Abraham. Next God changes Abraham's wife Sarai's name to Sarah, *(meaning Princess)*.

> *GEN 17:15-16*
>
> *And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.*

Together Abram and Sarai are to give birth to many nations. In fact they do via a miracle. Abram's age is estimated at one hundred and Sarai's at eighty. Abraham's acceptance of this as a done deal, which he accepts without question or doubt, despite the obvious physical constraints demonstrates his faith. Therefore the significance of changing names upon the formation of a new union *blessed by Him*[7] makes perfect sense. To those not of *The Book*, this may seem silly. The bible is where the tradition comes from and the tradition reaches beyond the story of Abraham and Sarah or Adam and Eve. Changing names occurs outside of ancient monotheistic traditions. Greeks and Romans, polytheistic and non-believers in one god changed names as well. TOP

CHANGING OF TITLE, CHANGING OF PURPOSE

A religious text and a historical document, the Bible illustrates the customs, lifestyles, beliefs and traditions of ancient cultures within its pages. And though God initiated name changing with Abraham and Sarah, the tradition carries through pagan and multi-theistic societies including the Romans, Greeks and Babylonians.

A person's name during the times of the Old Testament and through the first millennium of the New denoted the essence of the person: Erik the Red, Attila the Hun, Julius Caesar. In the absence of business cards, names announced to the world what you did or where you came from. Today names serve to identify a person, separating him or her

Copyright © 2005 Couples Company, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

from others in society. Once spoken, people do not know what you are or from where you came without adjectives, nouns or qualifiers like *Mrs.* With your given name, people only know what to call you. Names today function as serial numbers. This has not always been the case. TOP

Leon Morris in his book *"The Epistle to the Romans"* explains the significance of name change in the ancient world*: "…in antiquity generally it was held that in some undefined way the name summed up the whole person. That is the significance of changing a person's name. God changed people's names at times when he bestowed a new character on them. When one person changed another person's name it emphasized his lordship"*[8]

In ancient times, what you were called designated who you were at that point in your life. A changed life course or purpose is announced by changing your name; this is significant. Consider the following two examples:

> **EXAMPLE 1**: A friend of mine was born in Jerusalem in the 1950's. Upon his birth in Palestine he was given an Arabic name allowing him to blend in with the Muslim majority and function within society. However upon baptism, an event Christians believe sets us on a course with God, he received a new identity, a Christian name, the purpose of which demonstrates to the world he now follows a new life path with a new purpose. Though born with an Arabic name, he is known by his Christian name.
>
> **EXAMPLE 2:** Prior to becoming an Apostle, Paul was Saul. When he became Christian he changed his name to Paul. He remains the same person yet becomes known by a different name because his life changed direction: Paul became a servant of Christ. As a Pharisee, Paul was Saul. As a Christian Saul is Paul. Paul's name change signifies the new path of his life and his new COVENANT with God.

The practice of changing ones' name to mark the beginning of a new life trek describes a tradition over five thousand years old. In times past, it was given names. Surnames didn't reach commonplace in society until the 11th century AD. Before then Sarah was simply *"Sarah wife of Abraham"*. Sarah didn't have a last name. Neither did Abraham. TOP

When a woman marries a man she signals to the world her new identity by changing her name to her husband's. Through this action she acknowledges God's new creation, the couple and thanks Him for bringing her husband and herself together. Upon marriage she enters into a covenant between her husband, herself and God. She becomes part of something greater than herself: a union blessed and created by God.

EXCEPTIONS: It should be noted in many Islamic societies, though Islam also follows the first five books of the Old Testament including Genesis, many Islamic women do not follow the Jewish and Christian tradition of changing their last names to their husband's. In Iran, Yemen, Jordan and Syria, a Muslim bride may only change to her husband's surname upon a court decision, a distinction of regional culture within specific Islamic countries that does not apply to all global Islamic marriages. This does not mean a

Copyright © 2005 Couples Company, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

married Islamic woman is not referred to as "Mrs. Joe Black" socially. It does mean on legal documents she signs with her maiden name unless the courts have changed such.

Most Latin based societies which are predominantly Christian, developed a unique solution to the name change issues. The married couple is still Mr. and Mrs. (his last name) in public and for all purposes except legal contracts. The wife's maiden name becomes *her children's middle name* thus allowing both family histories to pass to the next generation. This creates rather long names, but facilitates genealogy. TOP

MODERN VERSIONS OF TRADITION

Western society[9] draws heavily upon Christianity, first Catholic and later protestant for many of its customs, laws, traditions, values and history. Despite attempts in modern times to minimize Christianity and its influence via enlightened secularism, western society owes its values, principles and laws to Christianity. Given this, it is logical the primary reason brides change names may be found in the Bible. It also explains why so few journalists and educators know about or considered this source.

When I worked for the Washington Post in the early 1990's a theological survey covering journalists and their moral/value teachings published. The survey discovered fewer than 11% of journalists, (conservative or liberal) actually practice their faith[10]. Unless teaching theology or ancient civilizations professors as well rarely read the Bible or quote it thus explaining why none of the sources I consulted in media and academia could answer the question of why women change last names. Western society treads water within conditioning applied to discount faith and faith teachings' impact on our daily lives as old fashioned, stifling or prejudice. Labeling to prevent inquiry doesn't change the reality or impact. It does close minds, thus eliminating options. TOP

As for door number two, hyphenation, Patricia Wen a writer for the Boston Globe in her March 17, 2001 article entitled "Tradition, in name only--Most brides keep convention of taking husband's surname" notes*: "The women who began defying this social convention tend to fall into a narrow demographic category: highly educated and urban, often from the Northeast. For instance, in the Harvard-Radcliffe College class of 1990, 47 percent of married women currently keep or hyphenate their maiden names, a large percentage, but only 1 percent more than in the class of 1970, Radcliffe officials report."*

Wen's definition of hyphenators fits, but the why still wiggles. Next the scholarly rendition honors secularism padded in ten dollar words resembling an excuse not reason:

> *"The married change-name is, among other things, a psychological act, an imprinting by society on the (bride-bridegroom) initiate's consciousness. A newly-coined married name encodes new information about the man or woman. It connotes primarily that a new social relationship has occurred. A new name is a symbol of allegiance to a new person, a new nexus of relations, a starting-over."*

Copyright © 2005 Couples Company, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Marriage, naming and the state: JC Maher, Journal of Asian Pacific Communication, Volume 10, Number 2, February 2001, pp. 313-329(17)

Don't worry if you didn't quite understand Maher's explanation. I had to read it several times myself. He confirms what the Bible explains without providing the source.

CONCLUSION

The three reasons governing a bride's adoption of her husband's last name are: Protection of family and wealth, designation of a new life direction and acknowledgement of God's presence in and endorsement of the marriage. The tradition begins in the Old Testament and transcends faith to the polytheistic societies of Greece, Babylonia and Rome where tradition held names changed when life's path or purpose changed. <END>

AUTHOR'S THOUGHTS

I began researching this because I wanted to know why I should change my name when I marry in 2006. I had no idea the answer would be in the Bible, let alone religious. In retrospect, this should not surprise anyone. After three months of research, over a hundred sources and multiple interviews eliciting scant rendering or reason it took researching a completely unrelated subject, dispensationalism, for me to stumble upon the answer. Both subjects begin in Genesis with Abram.

As a bride-to-be the importance of this, acknowledging God's presence and endorsement in and of my marriage to my fiancé in 2006 eliminates any doubt I had about changing my name. You see, as a Christian I believe God marries us, not the state. It really doesn't matter what the state does in relation to marriage, what it calls marriage or who it creates legal contracts for. By my faith marriage is only legal when performed within the covenant. That covenant is specific, designating who can and who cannot marry in the eyes of God and what our duties are to each other as husband and wife.

In short, my vows are to my husband and God, not the United States, the State of California or the county of Riverside. Only God can endorse, bless and acknowledge the marriage though the state may attempt to tax, legislate or control it. Changing my name pays honor to the union He creates and the blessing He bestows. It is a way of honoring Him, what he created and what no man is permitted to destroy. For me, that is a really good reason to take his name over mine. For others it may not be.--LDL

PRINT

POSTSCRIPT: *While researching this subject the original article ran twenty pages. Over the next few weeks I'll be adding the additional sections which expand on:*

- *The Marriage Covenant: What it is and where the vows come from*
- *The Price of Secularization*
- *The History of Surnames*

Copyright © 2005 Couples Company, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

- *Faith vs. Politics: Homosexual Unions*

---

[1] This is a generalization based upon Western traditions beginning in Europe and later exported to the Americas. Different cultures treat this uniquely. TOP

[2] *NATION STATES emerged during the seventeenth century AD. A NATION STATE is man-made and involves defendable and defined borders with international recognition and sovereignty. A NATION is a common people, cultural in nature bound together by common beliefs, customs and origin. During biblical time the people following one God were first known as the Israelites, then the Hebrews and later by their tribe, Pharisees, and finally in the fourteenth century, Jews. These followers of God through the various changes to their faith, culture and focus defined the "nation" of Israel…just as today we refer to followers of Mohammed as "the nation of Islam".* TOP

[3] The first legal document was the Urukagina's Code of 2350 BC though the first law school wasn't established until 1100 AD. Modern law as we currently see it appears to have begun with the 1689 drafting of the English Bill of Rights. The use of family law to govern the passing down of inheritance didn't come into being until the early twentieth century, largely occurring from the efforts of Elizabeth Cady Stanton between 1848 and 1877. If you are paying or receiving child support, divorced or engaged in a common law marriage, you have Stanton to thank…or blame. The modern law Americans practice came of age in the twentieth century. In previous century's law focused upon common law, basic right/wrong and personal accountability. Today law in the United States increasingly parallels Talmudic law, circular, victim/perpetrator with deferred accountability. TOP

Sources: DuhaimeLaw.org, Social Science Research Network

[6] Mary Magdalen was so called either from Magdala near Tiberias, on the west shore of Galilee, or possibly from a Pharisaic expression meaning "curling women's hair," which rabbinical teachings explain means of an adulteress. TOP

[7] The faiths of The Book, *Jewish, Christian and Islam* believe that God marries a couple. The state cannot. The vows taken during the ceremony are to each other and to God and in so doing faithful Jews, Christians and Muslims enter into the marriage covenant, a covenant defined by their faith and obedience to each other and God. TOP

8. Selected Bible passages relating to God's changing of name.

Gen. 17:5: No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. GEN. 17:15: Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. GEN. 32:28: And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." 2 Kings 24:17 [17] Then the king of Babylon made Mattaniah, *Jehoiachin's* uncle, king in his place, and changed his name to Zedekiah. TOP

[9] Denotes the customs of Europe and later the Americas TOP

[10] Many of our modern sayings, laws, customs and traditions originate specifically in the Old Testament which contains books shared by all three monotheistic faiths and the New Testament which is Christian. TOP

POSTSCRIPT: *While researching this subject the original article ran twenty pages. Over the next few weeks I'll be adding the additional sections which expand on this thesis:*

- *The Marriage Covenant: What it is and where the vows come from*
- *The Price of Secularization*
- *The History of Surnames*
- *Faith vs. Politics: Homosexual Unions*

Copyright © 2005 Couples Company, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED