

“The Well” - a monologue from Hagar // Genesis 16
from [Inspired by Rachel Held Evans](#) (adapted for length)



Most of the time, God does the naming. Abraham. Isaac. Israel. Just one person in all your sacred Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn't a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was I, Hagar--foreigner, woman, slave.

I belonged to a woman blessed with all the things a woman wants--wealth, nobility, beauty--but not the thing a woman in an unsettled territory needs: a womb that can carry a boy. Sarah wore her laugh lines like jewelry. The desert wind sent her white hair dancing and carried her unmistakable peals of laughter through the arid atmosphere like rain. Old and young, men and women, slave and free ventured to her tent for advice on breeding goats, arranging marriages, spicing food, and offering prayers. And yet, in our world, they called this woman *barren*.

I had the misfortune to belong to a woman who believed the wrong name.

So she gave *my* body to Abraham. You will think me callous for not being more angry, more resistant to the charge before me, but bearing the child of a tribal leader, even in another woman's name, carried with it at least a challenge to my expendability. The moment the old man rolled away from me--I begged the gods of Egypt for a boy. Oh, I begged to every god in every language I knew.

A baby's movements don't begin as kicks, but as subtle, enigmatic flutters; they don't tell you that. So I doubted right until the morning when I placed my hands on my belly and felt the sudden, certain impression of a heel. No woman can prepare for the awe of it, the overwhelming surge of joy and fear. Instinctively, I looked around for someone to tell, but of course, no one was there. Then came a second nudge, this one longer and firmer, as if to say, "*Don't you dare think yourself alone, Mama; we're here in this world together.*" My baby had yet to take a breath of air, and already we shared a secret.

Perhaps I sang a bit too loudly. Perhaps I carried myself with more confidence than before. Your scribes will say I grew contemptuous of my mistress, but your scribes never asked for my view of it.

The only thing I know is that for every day my belly grew rounder, Sarah's spirit grew stormier. A slave expects harsh words and withheld rations, but the physical abuse surprised me. Taunts turned to slaps, barked orders to mule whips to the back. I would not have fled had she not

threatened the baby's life; I want you to know that. I would not have taken the risk of running into the desert in the dead of night had I not feared the worst. Abraham did nothing, of course; my mute idols even less. *Did they even notice? Could they even see?*

Your scribes will remember it as a silly women's spat, but your scribes never carried a baby through the desert. Your scribes never knew the singular desperation of counting the hours from the last reassuring kick.

As the sun rose like a great unseeing eye over the fifth or sixth mile, and the weight on my pelvis numbed my legs, I collapsed into the dust.

Water gone, food regurgitated, blood streaking down my thighs, I waited there to die...or to deliver...or both. *Who will find my body? I wondered. And what story will they tell of it?*

Then, on the rippling horizon: a well!

I crawled to it, plunged my face in. I think I must have fainted there, or slept.

All I know is when I opened my eyes, a stranger stood beside me--a presence neither male nor female, neither Egyptian nor Hebrew, neither safe nor threatening--and in a voice that sounded like my mother's, spoke:

"Hagar, slave of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?"

This stranger knew my name.

"I am fleeing from my mistress," I answered. What could I say of where I was going?

"Go back to Sarah," the stranger said. "But do not be afraid. Not only will this child live, but through him I will give you a whole nation of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, too numerous to count."

I cannot tell you why, but immediately I believed. This stranger with the voice of a dove spoke with the authority of God.

"Your son will grow into a fighter," God said, "a wild donkey of a man. But even as he struggles, he will survive. Call him Ishmael, for it means 'God hears,' and God has heard you in your misery today."

In spite of everything, I smiled at the part about the donkey, for already I knew how that boy kicked. Every mama is something of a prophet.

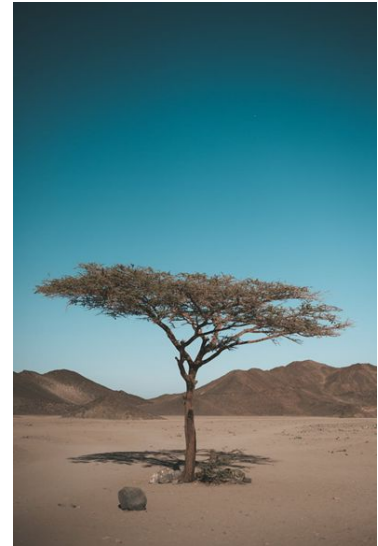
You may think a prophecy of struggle and strife would dishearten a pregnant mother, but a slave does not struggle or strive, a slave only obeys. If the prophecy was true, it meant this boy, my Ishmael, would be free.

With what force I could muster, I rose to face God, the brightness of the sun obscuring both our faces. I knew it was the God of my mistress, whom she called Yahweh, but if I was to be the mother of a nation, I would need to give this God a new name.

“You are a God who not only hears, but also sees,” I said, surprised by the strength in my voice. “I have seen the One who sees me.”

So I named God as I named the well: El Roi, the God Who Sees.

Many of my sisters would draw from that well: the Hebrew midwives who defied Pharaoh, the despised Samaritan who dared to speak to the Messiah, the young women ripped from their homes in West Africa and shipped like livestock across the sea, the mamas who saw their boys lynched and the grandmas who saw their grandsons gunned down, the millions of black and brown people whose names the world has forgotten but whose God never failed to see, the fierce female prophets and preachers who rose from the ashes of their suffering and dared, like me, to survive and to name. I, too, would return to it, years later when Sarah banished me to the wilderness again, this time with a little boy clinging to my legs.



My faith, like Abraham’s, was tested. But my faith, unlike the patriarchs, was not immortalized in your art, nor was it remembered in the litany of Hebrews or in the genealogies of your New Testament.

Yet, just one person in all your sacred Scripture dared to name God, and it wasn’t a priest, prophet, warrior, or king. It was I, Hagar--foreigner, woman, slave.

Don’t you dare forget.