


I believe in water: A religious perspective on rain and rainmakers

**Author:**Jaco Beyers¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Jaco Beyers,
jaco.beyers@up.ac.za

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Water has always played a significant role in religions. This contribution seeks to investigate comparatively the figure of the rainmaker as presented in Traditional African religions and biblical texts. The phenomenon of the rainmaker is at the centre of this investigation. In Traditional African religions, the rainmaker is not only a figure controlling rain but also has a substantial social standing. In biblical texts, the rainmaker (of which Samuel and Elijah can be considered as examples), functions more like a prophet without an elite social and political status. Despite the differences in the status of the rainmaker among Traditional African religions and biblical texts, both traditions make it abundantly clear that rain originates with God. God sends or withholds the rain. The figure of the rainmaker as a social leader can today contribute to instilling a sense of using water responsibly and guiding communities in considering climate action to ensure sustainable living on land and water. A sense of concern over the responsible use of water will bind communities together. In this way, water can be a binding factor and stimulating topic-enhancing interreligious dialogue.

Contribution: This contribution is a comparative study of the phenomenon of the rainmaker as presented in Traditional African religions and biblical texts. It aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, number 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation); number 13 (Climate Action) and number 15 (Life on Land).

Keywords: rainmaker; Christianity; Traditional African religions; interreligious; dialogue; water; spirituality; religion.

Introduction

In this article, the role of rainmakers will be investigated as an expression of the role water plays in communities, especially in Africa. A lot has been published¹ on the figure of the rainmaker. The most influential publications on rainmakers in general are that by Samuel S. Dornan (1927), John Middleton (1971) and Terje Oestigaard (2014). There are several more examples of ethnographical research on rainmakers in specific cultural communities.

The emphasis on water influenced communities worldwide to consider the spiritual value of water. In Africa, water carries spiritual significance in terms of the use of water for healing or purification.

This contribution seeks to analyse and compare the way religious communities value the spiritual role of water. In African communities, water fulfils a religious role. The role of the one bringing rain (the rainmaker) demonstrates the theological understanding of the relation between transcendence and immanence. How rain is discussed in biblical texts also reveals a theological understanding of reality.

The Greek philosopher Empedocles (c. 450 BCE) proposed that the universe consists of the following four essential elements, fire, air, earth and water. Before Empedocles, several philosophers suggested that one or more of the elements are the essential and principal elements.² Empedocles was the first to suggest that the four elements combined constitute the universe as the four essential roots (Russell 1991:61). Water is essential for the origin and physical continuation of life (cf. Dornan 1927:185).

Controlling the weather to ensure a steady supply of water has always been the endeavour of communities. James Frazer (1993:60) devoted a chapter discussing the ways people attempted

1. See the bibliography presented by Kwanya (2018) for a fairly complete list of publication on the topic of rainmaking.

2. The Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus suggested water as the essential principle of the universe, where as Anaximenes of Miletus suggested it was air and Heraclitus claimed it was fire.

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to control the weather and rain. Frazer labelled these attempts as magic.

Water has intrinsic value to many sectors in society (Ahmad, Brown & Steiner 2023). Currently, the concern over the responsible use of water globally manifests in several large-scale and high-profile discussions and meetings. In this regard, refer to the UN World Water Day 22 March 2024 and the G20 forum hosted by Indian in 2023 where time was devoted to a G20 Water Dialogue platform.

Recently published research has focussed on how religions contribute to environmental concerns and the preservation of water and nature (see Mufid et al. 2023; Mapulanga 2023). When the sources of water become limited or intermittently available, it would be helpful to be able to generate or replenish the source of water. Someone who can make rain is required. The figure of a rainmaker has played a significant role in religions.

For Oestigaard (2014:36), linking religion and rain is in fact linking religion to ecology. Oestigaard (2014) discusses the gradual changes in traditions and in particular the gradual disappearance of the figure of the rainmaker and the practices of rain making.

It is not only in Africa that rainmakers are known. China has a long tradition of rainmakers (compare Ze, Slingerland & Henrich n.d.), and so does the Japanese folklore (Bownas & Brown 2013). Rainmaking can refer to the ritualistic activities performed by a religious functionary, known as the rainmaker. However, rainmaking can also refer to the artificial action of inducing clouds to deliver rain. Fletcher (1992) provides the scientific description of making rain. This understanding of making rain will not form part of the discussion to follow. An ethical evaluation of this phenomenon might prove valuable.

The approach followed here is a phenomenological discussion of the figure of the rainmaker as observed in an African and biblical context. Phenomenology is an attempt to turn to the things themselves and have the issue under discussion speak for itself while avoiding preconceived ideas to determine the outcome of the investigation (compare Cox 2010:26–28). Not the ideas but the issue itself informs the study. By following a phenomenological approach, the bias of labelling rainmakers as unscientific opportunists or magicians is avoided.

The method of gathering data followed here is literature study. When discussing elements from the Traditional African religions, it must be made clear that the multiplicity of expressions of religion in Africa is accepted. There is not only one form of Traditional African religion. See, in this regard, Mbiti's (1969:1) convincing argument on the use of the plural when talking about religion in Africa. This would imply that when looking at the phenomenon of the rainmaker as expressed in Africa, there are multiple versions of the rainmaker and associated functions to consider. This study does not focus on one cultural expression but considers the phenomenon of the rainmaker as expressed in communities in Africa.

The aim of this study is to indicate how water can become a point of contact between religions, stimulating interreligious dialogue. This is possible because of the possibility of social cohesion based on the communal dependence on water. The study starts off with a discussion as to what phenomenologically constitutes a rainmaker as observed in Traditional African religions. This is followed by listing references to rain in a biblical context to identify similarities and differences in a comparative way between the figure of the rainmaker in Africa and the biblical texts. The study concludes by attempting to identify opportunities for how rain and water can lead diverse religious communities to dialogue.

Rainmakers

'Rain is regarded by African societies as a sacred phenomenon' (Mbiti 1969:176). Rain is not only considered a natural phenomenon as the result of evaporation and condensation; extraordinary interventions can bring it about. There are various means to bring about rain in an extraordinary way, ranging from incantations, rituals and sacrifices, prayers, spells; to people possessing the power to call or bring the rain – the rainmakers. As to a definition of rainmaker, the following description of Ombati (2017) is useful:

[T]he term 'rainmaking' is herein used to refer to those traditional practices, rites and rituals thought capable of controlling the weather, and 'rainmakers' are the people bestowed with the power to lead those practices. (p. 81)

Frazer (1993:62–62) states that the rainmaker '... is a very important personage; and often a special class of magicians exists for the purpose of regulating the heavenly water supply'. Frazer continues to describe various practices and activities from communities all over the world on how the heavenly water supply is regulated. These activities according to Frazer (1993:63) are biased towards a Western distinction between magic, science and religion, ascribing to 'imitative magic'. For some, like Frazer, the rainmaker may be considered to fall in the class of a magician.

Middleton (1971:179) describes rainmakers in Africa as 'ritual functionaries'. Besides fulfilling a function in society, the rainmaker also has a specific social standing. This is confirmed by Mbiti (1969:174). Middleton (1971:199) indicates that in some communities in Africa, the role of the rainmaker is attached to either a king, a person of royal descent or a priest. According to Middleton (1971:195), the rainmaker is considered a direct descendant of the clan founder. The power to control rain has been given by the Divine Spirit to the hero-ancestors. The power of control over rain is transmitted to the next in line most closely related to the former rainmaker. The rainmaker can either be male or female (Middleton 1971:196). Among the Venda of the Limpopo province in South Africa, the rain queen, Modjadji, has legendary power over rain and society.

Bringing about rain requires knowledge of how to use the tools of the trait'.³ Middleton (1971:196) describes the use of a rainpot filled with rainstones and how manipulating the stones can cause rain to fall or cease from falling. Besides the rainstones, Mbiti (1969:176) mentions the burning of rain leaves of which the ascending smoke is believed to capture rain and bring it down to earth. Animal sacrifices to the Supreme Being are also not uncommon (Mbiti 1969:176; Middleton 1971:196). Prayers can be directed to the Supreme Being or ancestors (Mbiti 1969:176). Sprinkling water from sacred wells can be used to symbolise falling rain (Mbiti 1969:176).

The rainmaker could, besides bringing rain, also stop warfare, stop barrenness in wives or cattle and even stop violence between feuding parties (Middleton 1971:196). It is clear that rainmakers essentially have power over fertility of land, women and livestock (Middleton 1971:196). It appears that rainmakers are in the life-giving business. Mbiti (1969:176) indicates that in Africa, it is generally accepted by people (including rainmakers) that only God can generate rain. Rainmakers are only intermediaries. They can function as diviners, medicine men, mediums or priests (Mbiti 1969:176).

In Africa, the rhythm of community life is determined by rain and celebrated with ritual activities. Many rituals coincide with the event of rain (Mbiti 1969:174): the celebration at the beginning of the rainy season; the planting season; the first-fruits; the harvest. The rites associated with these events strengthen community consciousness and solidarity (Mbiti 1969:174). Rain is life enabling; therefore, the rainmakers are perceived as having power over life. They seek and contribute towards the continuation of life.

Middleton (1971:196) explains the African understanding of reality by indicating that the world can be divided into two spheres: the one sphere is associated with order and authority and the other is the sphere of chaos, disorder and uncertainty. Humans reside in the sphere of order and are unable to control or predict processes associated with the sphere of disorder. Functionaries such as prophets and diviners are able to traverse between the spheres (Middleton 1971:196). Rainmakers are perceived to be permanently in contact with the Supreme Being (Middleton 1971:198). Rain falling from above connects humans with the Supreme Being who is believed to reside above (Mbiti 1969:177).

As rain is associated with the benevolence of God, those who control the rain have a special connection with the divine (Mbiti 1969:177). God is the giver of rain; rainmakers can only implore or plead for the coming of rain. This understanding of the power of rainmakers in Africa corresponds to some extent with the understanding of people depicted in the Bible who control the rain.

Biblical references to rain

What follows is a non-exhaustive list of references to rain in the Bible. The context of each reference to rain is not

³ Refer to Frazer (1993:62–78) for more examples.

investigated as the purpose is to compare the phenomenon of rain making. This study admits that the theological discussion of each reference to rain is not part of the investigation as the focus is on phenomenology.

Genesis

2:5-6 – Before the first rain, a mist went up from the earth to water the ground.

7:4, 7:12; 8:2 – God warns Noah about the coming flood and the 40 days and nights of rain. God allows the rain to stop.

19:24 – God rained burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah.

Exodus

9:18, 9:23–24, 9:33–34 – God sends a destructive hailstorm mixed with rain as one of the plagues on Egypt.

16:4 – God promises to rain bread (manna) from heaven to feed the Israelites.

Leviticus

26:4 – A promise of timely rains if the Israelites obey God's commands.

Numbers

16:30–33 – The earth opens and swallows up rebels during a rainstorm.

Deuteronomy

11:10–17 – The promise of rain in season for the Promised Land, if Israel is obedient.

28:12, 28:24 – Blessings of rain in due season, or curses of drought and dust storms are prophesied.

32:2 – God's teaching is compared to rain.

Joshua

10:11–12 – At God's command, hailstones rain down on Israel's enemies.

Judges

5:4 – A poetic reference to the 'rain streaming down' during Deborah's song.

1 Samuel

12:17–18 – Samuel calls for thunder and rain as a sign from God.

2 Samuel

1:21 – A metaphorical request for rain on the battlefield.

23:4 – An allusion to a king being like rain on new grass.

1 Kings

8:35–36 – Solomon’s prayer for God to send rain in times of drought.

17:1, 17:14, 18:41–46 – Elijah prays for a drought, then later for rain to end it.

2 Kings

3:16–17 – Elisha prophesies that the dry valley will be filled with water.

Job

5:10 – God is described as giving rain on the earth.

28:25–26 – God sends the rain and makes a way for the thunderstorm.

36:27–28 – God draws up water vapor which condenses into rain.

37:6 – God commands the snow and rain to fall on the earth.

38:25–28 – These are rhetorical questions about God’s control over rain and lightning.

Psalms

65:9–10 – God sends rain to replenish the earth.

68:9 – God sends plentiful rain, refreshing His inheritance.

72:6 – A prayer that the king will be like rain on mown grass.

84:6 – A metaphor of rain filling the pools in the valleys.

135:7 – God causes the rain to fall.

147:8 – God covers the sky with clouds and sends rain.

Proverbs

16:15 – A king’s favor is compared to a cloud bringing spring rain.

25:14 – Those who boast of gifts never given are like clouds without rain.

26:1 – Honor is not fitting for a fool, just as rain in harvest is not fitting.

27:15 – A quarrelsome wife is compared to a constant dripping on a rainy day.

Ecclesiastes

11:3 – If the clouds are full, they pour out rain on the earth.

Song of Songs

2:11 – A figurative reference to the winter rains being over.

Isaiah

5:6 – God will command the clouds not to rain on a vineyard.

18:4 – God will be silent like the heat before the harvest rain.

30:23 – God promises bread and abundant rain for the righteous.

44:14 – Rain nourishes the trees of the forest.

55:10–11 – The word of God is likened to rain watering the earth.

Jeremiah

3:3 – No rain will be felt because of the nation’s rebellion.

5:24 – God sends the seasonal rains at their proper times.

10:13, 51:16 – God causes the rain to fall.

14:22 – Only God can provide rain.

Lamentations

3:48 – Jeremiah’s eyes flow with streams of tears like rain.

Ezekiel

1:28, 38:22 – Visions are accompanied by the appearance of a rainbow.

34:26 – God promises to send showers of blessing.

38:22 – God will rain down torrents, hailstones, fire, and sulfur.

Daniel

9:27 – This is part of a prophecy about the ‘desolator’ putting an end to sacrifice and grain offering.

Hosea

6:3 – A plea for God to come like the latter and former rains.

10:12 – A call to seek God until He comes to rain righteousness.

13:15 – A symbol of God withholding the rain and drying up the springs.

Joel

2:23 – A promise of God sending the former and latter rains.

2:28–32 – A prophecy about pouring out the Spirit and signs like blood, fire and rain.

Amos

4:7–8 – God withheld rain from some cities as punishment.

Zechariah

10:1–2 – A call to ask God for rain in the latter season.

14:17 – A prophecy about nations not keeping the Feast of Tabernacles and receiving no rain.

Matthew

5:45 – God allows it to rain on the just and unjust.

Acts

14:17 – God sends rain from heaven and fruitful seasons.

28:2 – Paul experiences heavy rain on the island of Malta.

James

5:7 – A call to be patient for the early and latter rains.

5:17–18 – Elijah's example of praying for the rain to stop and start again.

Revelation

11:6 – Two witnesses given power to stop the rain from falling during their ministry.

16:21 – Huge hailstones weighing a talent each rain down as one of the bowl judgments.

This comprehensive list covers the various instances where rain, or the lack thereof, is mentioned in the Bible, highlighting its significance in agriculture. The references to rain can, however, not be detached from its spiritual significance. These references can be divided into three categories: rain as a blessing (i.e., Is 30:23; Is 44:14; Ezk 34:26; Ac 14:17); rain in an agricultural context (i.e., Dt 28:12, 28:24; Is 44:14); rain (or no rain) as divine punishment (i.e., Gn 19:24; Ex 9:18, 9:23–24, 9:33–34; Num 16:30–33; Jos 10:11–12; Jr 3:3; Ezk 38:22; Hs 13:15; Am 4:7–8; Zch 14:17; Rv 16:21). Many African communities also see water, thunderstorms and floods as means of punishment (Mbiti 1969:54).

What is made abundantly clear in the mentioned texts is that God is the giver of rain (i.e., Job 5:10; 28:25–26; 36:27–28 37:6; 38:25–28; Ps 65:9–10; 68:9; 72:6; 84:6; 135:7; 147:8; Jr 5:24; 10:13; 51:16; 14:22; Mt 5:45; Ac 14:17). Rain might be a blessing of God to the earth to ensure nourishment and growth. Rain can also be a metaphor for the blessing or punishment from God. When God sends or withholds rain, it might be meant as a punishment. He can send fire and hail to fall like rain in order to bring punishment. In many African communities, it is firmly believed that it is only God who can send rain (Mbiti 1969:65).

There are two rare instances in the Bible of what we would refer to as rainmakers. The first example of a rainmaker is Elijah (1 Ki 17:1, 17:14, 18:41–46). In this instance, Elijah is imploring God not to make it rain and then to send rain. Although Elijah prays for rain, it is still God sending the rain. The second instance is Samuel (1 Sm 12:17–18) who acts as a rainmaker when he prays to God to show his might through an unexpected rainstorm.

The main difference between the two instances of rainmakers in the Bible, and the way rainmakers function in Traditional African religions is the expected descendancy and social role of the rainmaker. Elijah and Samuel are prophets and not social leaders. They are called by God to act as messengers to Israel as prophets, not to establish a dynasty of rainmakers or rulers. In an African context, rainmakers have a certain social standing besides having the ability to generate rain. Dornan (1927:185) indicates how the rainmaker in an African context could even have more power and wealth than the local chief. This is confirmed by Müller (2008) when he indicates that Bishop Lekganyane of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC).

[I]s of course no ordinary rainmaker. He talks less of rain and more of social concerns such as HIV and corruption ... Lekganyane might simultaneously be the Bishop of their church, as well as the paramount chief of their ZCC nation. (p. 289)

God is the only giver of life-sustaining rain. In Christianity, the metaphor of rain is reserved for the domain controlled by God. No human (prophet or rainmaker) has the autonomous ability to generate or command rain. God gives the command. In Traditional African religions, one would suspect to find it differently. It is expected that rainmakers can manipulate powers and energy to force nature to produce rain – subscribing to Frazer's (1993:63) concept of magic. The opposite is, however, true. In Traditional African religions, it is still God who is implored to send rain. The hierarchical structure, however, results in the rainmaker consulting the medium who communicates to the ancestors who in turn convey the message to the Supreme Being who commands the rain to come. Rain in this context has a spiritual value.

The spiritual value assigned to water

In Africa, water is assigned a spiritual value. Water plays a role in purification and healing, and is widely regarded as a purifying element in many African traditions. It is used to cleanse individuals, homes and sacred spaces of negative energies, curses or spiritual impurities (compare Mbiti 1969:54). Ritual baths or immersions in rivers, streams or the ocean are common practices for physical and spiritual purification (Opoku 1978:106).

The specific practices and beliefs surrounding the use of water for healing can vary widely among different African ethnic groups and regions. However, water is generally revered as a powerful and sacred element with the ability to purify, connect with the spiritual realm and facilitate healing

processes in Traditional African religions (Mbiti 1969:81). In some African traditions, water is used as a tool for divination or foretelling. The movements, patterns or reflections in water are interpreted by diviners or spiritual practitioners to gain insights into the causes of illnesses or to determine appropriate healing methods (See ed. Peek 1991:104, 106).

For Oestigaard (2014), the way reality is understood is important to understand the function of the rainmaker. According to Oestigaard (2014:39), there are two co-existing realities in African cosmologies: one is the visible world where all living activities take place for everyday living; and second is the invisible world where spiritual beings like God, spirits and ancestors reside. This is also the realm of witchcraft and the occult (Oestigaard 2014:39). The forces in the invisible world determine the outcomes in the visible world. The absence of water in the visible world is caused by malevolent forces in the invisible world, and can therefore only be resolved by imploring the ancestors to fix the problem and cause the rain to return (Oestigaard 2014:40).

According to Oestigaard (2014:40), Christianity works with a different understanding of reality. The misfortunes (e.g., disease or drought) experienced here on earth are not because of the actions caused by inhabitants of the spiritual realm. God is not perceived to cause these problems. The occurrence of these events must be understood against the broader functioning of the universe. The difference between the African and Christian cosmology is, therefore, that according to an African understanding, the ancestors can be requested to manipulate nature and bring rain (Oestigaard 2014:41). In Christianity, it is impossible to manipulate God. Although the rain may be a blessing, the coming of the rain is still the grace of God. A gracious God sends the life-giving rain on all creatures on earth (see Mt 5:45 referring to God's all-encompassing grace on all living beings). Rain then becomes a sign of divine favour and grace. Rain reminds humans of their dependence on God as the actual One in control. Acknowledging that God sends the rain becomes an act of pious spirituality, recognising human limitations and inabilities.

The attempt at controlling the rain should not be seen as an act of deviance towards the all-powerful God who reigns over nature, nor should it be interpreted as an attempt to implement magic to manipulate the powers of nature. The need for a rainmaker is an indication of human limitation and not human excellence. The rainmaker in Traditional African religions and in biblical texts all acknowledge and emphasise the ultimate dependence on the only One who has complete control over the rain. Rain is a sign of the blessing of God. Rain creates an opportunity for people from different religious affiliations to engage in dialogue.

The topic of water creating opportunities for interreligious dialogue

A recent research project by the Cambridge Interfaith Programme investigated the opportunities the topic of water created for religious communities to engage in conversations and actions contributing to social well-being. In this regard, the research report compiled by Anastasia Badder (2023) is of import. The report highlights the specific place of religion in stimulating engagement in local communities (Badder 2023:23). Many of the conversations on water in religious communities led to collaborative activities geared towards water preservation and sustainable use of water sources (Badder 2023:26).

The comprehensive report deals with the relationship between religions and water (Badder 2023:18). The report (Badder 2023) indicates that:

[M]any religious communities and individual members are already involved in a wide range of what they explicitly identify as sustainability and sustainability-related initiatives. Equally, they are aware of the pressing need to care for water and nature. (p. 26)

Religious leaders can play a role in conversations on ecology and water preservation

The UN World Water Day was on 22 March 2024. The theme of World Water Day 2024 was 'Water for Peace'. When communities cooperate on water, a positive ripple effect is created – 'fostering harmony, generating prosperity and building resilience to shared challenges' (United Nations).

In 2023, India hosted the G20 forum and devoted time to a G20 Water Dialogue platform. Annually, the G20 countries are allowed to present their best practices in sustainable and resilient water management at the forum, known as the G20 Water Dialogue (G20 Water Platform).

Water has indeed intrinsic value to many sectors of society and has become the topic around which religions can gather to discuss possibilities of sustainable water consumption. Ahmad et al. (2023) indicate how the UN World Water Day and G20 Water Dialogue have created opportunities for religions to contribute to addressing this dilemma.

These fora (G20 Water Platform; UN World Water Day) create spaces where religions can participate in the conversation on water. Water becomes the topic that stimulates interreligious dialogue. These opportunities for dialogue can be filtered down to local communities.

Social leaders (read rainmakers) can contribute to stimulating engagements in local communities on topics

relating to water. These social leaders might be referred to in other contexts (such as Traditional African religions) as the rainmaker. The rainmaker can bring communities together to discuss the mutual effect of rain or the absence thereof on society. Water then becomes the stimulus for interreligious dialogue.

Conclusion

Water plays an essential role in the human endeavour to survive on earth. Without water, life is impossible. Therefore, the occurrence of rain must be ensured. The place of the rainmaker in Traditional African religions and in biblical texts serves as examples of the role of the rainmaker in societies. Not only does the rainmaker intercede between communities and the spiritual realm to secure rain, but the rainmaker in African communities also occupies a social leadership position. The rainmaker serves as the facilitator for dialogue among communities.

Dialogue between religions on the topic of water can serve as a reason for conversation and collaboration to secure safe and clean water in communities. As the water from the falling rain is experienced as a divine blessing, the harmony between different collaborating religious communities can therefore, be experienced as a sacred blessing. Water can stimulate conversations between religions and can contribute towards the establishment of a harmonious society. I believe water can do all this.

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Author's contributions

J.B. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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