

# Ratu

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## Ratu, the Leader

The Gathic term *ratu* is derived from *eret*, meaning ‘to do right, to act properly’. It means the righteous **leader** who guides people with his constructive plans and programs, to peace, prosperity, happiness, and bliss. The term has been used six times in the Gathas. These instances describe the position and the functions of a *ratu*. “The leader of the living world... offer(s) civilization, nourishment, and strength”, and “acts with righteousness” (Song 2.2, 2.6). “According to the Primal Principles of Life, the leader, with his actions, does full justice to the wrongful and to the righteous, as well as to the person whose falsity is combined with his probity” (S 6.1). A leader is a life-healer who inspires one “through good mind” and protects (him or her) with[in] the divine dominion” (S 9.16). A “true leader of the lawful... is a humble intellectual” and as a settler, strengthens the world with righteousness by his proper actions (S 16.5). He is chosen by a world groaning under “fury, rapine, outrage, and aggression” to render it rehabilitated and led to “true civilization” (Song 2).

To sum up the Gathic concept of a leader (*ratu*), he or she is a humble, yet inspiring intellectual who justly leads the righteous and wrongful as well as the intermediates to promote the living world to peace and prosperity, and ultimately to wholeness and immortality.

Zarathushtra is the first person who comes to mankind “as the leader of the [righteous and wrongful] parties so that... all live in accordance with righteousness” (S 4.5). And as already said in *Yatha Ahu*, he is the chosen lord (*ahu*) and leader (*ratu*), and rehabilitator (*vastar*) of the living world—all three in one person.

In a eulogy in honor of Zarathushtra in the Farvardin Yasht, it is poetically said that the very Primal Principles of Life he expounded in his songs wished him to be the lord and leader (Yasht 13.92). Other parts of the Avesta acknowledge Zarathushtra as the “first and foremost lord and leader of the material world, particularly human beings”... because it was he who conveyed “the entire thought-provoking message, the righteous teaching” to humanity (Yasht 13.41; 90-92, 152; Yasna 70.1; Vispered 2.4; 11.21; 16.3). In fact, “Zarathushtra is the lord and leader” of all the people whom “Ahura Mazda knows better for their veneration done in accordance with righteousness” (Vispered 16.3). The Later Avesta forgets that the leader is to be “chosen” by the people and considers his leadership as an appointment by God (Yasht 5.89; 8.44). It is a slight deviation from the Gathic concept of free will and choice. Zarathushtra’s son Urvatad-nara is casually mentioned as leader (Vendidad 2.43).

After Zarathushtra, Avestan and Pahlavi records do not state that any other person was chosen as the lord (*ahu*). Perhaps, with the world well on its path of righteousness and the causes of evil and disorder expounded, there was no need to have one. As a chosen Ahu, Zarathushtra had shown the way to eliminating the evil.

However, the Avesta shows that the Gathic tradition of choosing the leader was kept alive for some time and that, for practical reasons, the office was given five grades: The *ratu* of the house, the settlement, the district, the country, and the world. It, thus, covered all the basic units of the Zarathushtrian assembly. The *ratu* was the most competent and learned of the respective unit. The post warranted a love for learning, practicing, and teaching religious knowledge at all levels of the society.

Still later, we find that the title of *ratu* was superseded by *athravan*, the title of the priests of the pre-Zarathushtrian cult. This was the second deviation. It gave the now thriving community its professional priests. They introduced their own eight categories of officiants. Now *ratu* was generalized to mean a priest (Nirangistan 82-83).

The Pahlavi rendering simply uses *rad*, the Middle Persian form of the term, and this does not help to understand the semantic change in its meaning. However, it sometimes uses the terms *dastur* and *herbad* to explain the position. The two are conveniently translated as “master” and “judge”. The subtle meaning and the Gathic concept of the “chosen” *ratu* is lost. It is not strange that we find that the *athravan* composer of the Mehr Yasht ignores Zarathushtra and makes Ahura Mazda appoint Mithra, the old god of contract, as the “lord and leader of the material world, particularly men” (Yasht 10.92)! Perhaps this explains the recession of *ratu* into a priestly officer who applies penalties to “contract-breakers (*Mithra-druj*, false-unto-Mithra) and wrongdoers and leads the corpse-bearers to the funerary destination” (Vendidad 5.25; 7.71; 8.11). It is because of this role as a penalizing officer that some scholars feel more convinced that it stands for a “judge” in the Avesta. Whatever the changes in the meaning of the word and the functions of the position, one finds less and less of *ratu*, and more and more of the well-installed priests as *athravan*, *magopat*, *mobed*, *dastavar*, and *dastur*, all of which lie outside the Gathic period and therefore, outside this essay.

The Persian literature, especially the *Shahnameh* has *rad* (plural *radân*) used as frequently as necessary, sometimes as *radân va mobedân* to mean the religious leaders of Zoroastrians.

The Zarathushtrian Assembly has, in its Gathic restoration move, restored the term and the post. Its **elected qualified** officiants are known as *ratus* in precisely the Gathic term.

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