



Odin Goes to Mimir's Well: His Sacrifice for Wisdom

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And so Odin, no longer riding on Sleipner, his eight-legged steed; no longer wearing his golden armor and his eagle-helmet, and without even his spear in his hand, traveled through Midgard, the World of Men, and made his way toward Jötunheim, the Realm of the Giants.

No longer was he called Odin All-Father, but Vegtam the Wanderer. He wore a cloak of dark blue and he carried a traveler's staff in his hands. And now, as he went toward Mimir's Well, which was near to Jötunheim, he came upon a Giant riding on a great Stag.

Odin seemed a man to men and a giant to giants. He went beside the Giant on the great Stag and the two talked together. "Who art thou, O brother?" Odin asked the Giant.

“I am Vafthrudner, the wisest of the Giants,” said the one who was riding on the Stag. Odin knew him then. Vafthrudner was indeed the wisest of the Giants, and many went to strive to gain wisdom from him. But those who went to him had to answer the riddles Vafthrudner asked, and if they failed to answer the Giant took their heads off.

“I am Vegtam the Wanderer,” Odin said, “and I know who thou art, O Vafthrudner. I would strive to learn something from thee.”

The Giant laughed, showing his teeth. “Ho, ho,” he said, “I am ready for a game with thee. Dost thou know the stakes? My head to thee if I cannot answer any question thou wilt ask. And if thou canst not answer any question that I may ask, then thy head goes to me. Ho, ho, ho. And now let us begin.”

“I am ready,” Odin said.

“Then tell me,” said Vafthrudner, “tell me the name of the river that divides Asgard from Jötunheim?”

“Ifling is the name of that river,” said Odin. “Ifling that is dead cold, yet never frozen.”

“Thou hast answered rightly, O Wanderer,” said the Giant. “But thou hast still to answer other questions. What are the names of the horses that Day and Night drive across the sky?”

“Skinfaxe and Hrimfaxe,” Odin answered. Vafthrudner was startled to hear one say the names that were known only to the Gods and to the wisest of the Giants. There was only one question now that he might ask before it came to the stranger’s turn to ask him questions.

“Tell me,” said Vafthrudner, “what is the name of the plain on which the last battle will be fought?”

“The Plain of Vigard,” said Odin, “the plain that is a hundred miles long and a hundred miles across.”

It was now Odin’s turn to ask Vafthrudner questions. “What will be the last words that Odin will whisper into the ear of Baldur, his dear son?” he asked.

Very startled was the Giant Vafthrudner at that question. He sprang to the ground and looked at the stranger keenly.

“Only Odin knows what his last words to Baldur will be,” he said, “and only Odin would have asked that question. Thou art Odin, O Wanderer, and thy question I cannot answer.”

“Then,” said Odin, “if thou wouldst keep thy head, answer me this: what price will Mimir ask for a draught from the Well of Wisdom that he guards?”

“He will ask thy right eye as a price, O Odin,” said Vafthrudner.

“Will he ask no less a price than that?” said Odin.

“He will ask no less a price. Many have come to him for a draught from the Well of Wisdom, but no one yet has given the price Mimir asks. I have answered thy question, O Odin. Now give up thy claim to my head and let me go on my way.”

“I give up my claim to thy head,” said Odin. Then Vafthrudner, the wisest of the Giants, went on his way, riding on his great Stag.

It was a terrible price that Mimir would ask for a draught from the Well of Wisdom, and very troubled was Odin All-Father when it was revealed to him. His right eye! For all time to be without the sight of his right eye! Almost he would have turned back to Asgard, giving up his quest for wisdom.

He went on, turning neither to Asgard nor to Mimir’s Well. And when he went toward the South he saw Muspelheim, where stood Surtur with the Flaming Sword, a terrible figure, who would one day join the Giants in their war against the Gods. And when he turned North he heard the roaring of the cauldron Hvergelmer as it poured itself out of Niflheim, the place of darkness and dread. And Odin knew that the world must not be left between Surtur, who would destroy it with fire, and Niflheim, that would gather it back to Darkness and Nothingness. He, the eldest of the Gods, would have to win the wisdom that would help to save the world.

And so, with his face stern in front of his loss and pain, Odin All-Father turned and went toward Mimir’s Well. It was under the great root of Ygdrasil—the root that grew out of Jötunheim. And there sat Mimir, the

Guardian of the Well of Wisdom, with his deep eyes bent upon the deep water. And Mimir, who had drunk every day from the Well of Wisdom, knew who it was that stood before him.

“Hail, Odin, Eldest of the Gods,” he said.

Then Odin made reverence to Mimir, the wisest of the world’s beings. “I would drink from your well, Mimir,” he said.

“There is a price to be paid. All who have come here to drink have shrunk from paying that price. Will you, Eldest of the Gods, pay it?”

“I will not shrink from the price that has to be paid, Mimir,” said Odin All-Father.

“Then drink,” said Mimir. He filled up a great horn with water from the well and gave it to Odin.

Odin took the horn in both his hands and drank and drank. And as he drank all the future became clear to him. He saw all the sorrows and troubles that would fall upon Men and Gods. But he saw, too, why the sorrows and troubles had to fall, and he saw how they might be borne so that Gods and Men, by being noble in the days of sorrow and trouble, would leave in the world a force that one day, a day that was far off indeed, would destroy the evil that brought terror and sorrow and despair into the world.

Then when he had drunk out of the great horn that Mimir had given him, he put his hand to his face and he plucked out his right eye. Terrible was the pain that Odin All-Father endured. But he made no groan nor moan. He bowed his head and put his cloak before his face, as Mimir took the eye and let it sink deep, deep into the water of the Well of Wisdom. And there the Eye of Odin stayed, shining up through the water, a sign to all who came to that place of the price that the Father of the Gods had paid for his wisdom.

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