

Numbers 22:23

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the ass saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field: and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way.

Analysis

The ass saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn (וַיַּרְבּוּ שְׁלוּפָה, wěḥarbô šělûpâ)—God opposed Balaam's journey with מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה (mal'ak YHWH, "the Angel of Yahweh"), often understood as a Christophany (pre-incarnate appearance of Christ). The drawn sword signaled divine opposition unto death. Astoundingly, **the ass saw** what the prophet could not—the beast perceived spiritual reality her master missed.

This ironic reversal indicts Balaam's spiritual blindness. The "seer" (ḥōzeh, one who sees visions, v. 8) couldn't see God's messenger, while a dumb animal did. When greed clouds spiritual vision, even donkeys have more discernment than prophets. Balaam smote the ass for her evasion, punishing her for the salvation she provided.

Historical Context

Angels with drawn swords appear at crucial junctures in salvation history (Genesis 3:24 guarding Eden; Joshua 5:13 before Jericho; 1 Chronicles 21:16 in judgment). The drawn sword indicates God's readiness to execute judgment. Balaam faced the same divine opposition Israel's enemies would encounter.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. When spiritual discernment fails and even "dumb" obstacles see danger you cannot, what does that reveal about how greed has blinded you?
2. How often do you punish the very means God uses to save you from destruction because they inconvenience your disobedient plans?
3. What drawn swords of divine opposition are you charging toward, blind to the judgment awaiting your path?

Interlinear Text

הַדֶּכְרָה: נֹצֵב יְהוָה מַלְאָךְ אֶת הָאֵס וַתֵּרָא
her into the way standing of the LORD the angel And the ass saw
H1870 H5324 H3068 H4397 H853 H860 H7200

מִן הָאֵס וְהָטָה לְבִידוֹ שְׁלֹפָה וְחֶרֶב וּ
H4480 H860 H5186 H3027 H8025 H2719
And the ass to turn in his hand drawn and his sword

הָאֵס וְהָטָה לְבִידוֹ שְׁלֹפָה וְחֶרֶב וּ
And the ass and Balaam smote into the field into the way her into the way
H860 H1109 H5221 H7704 H1980 H1870

הָאֵס וְהָטָה לְבִידוֹ שְׁלֹפָה וְחֶרֶב וּ
her into the way to turn
H1870 H5186

Additional Cross-References

Jude 1:11 (Parallel theme): Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core.

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