

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 (וְהָרַבּוּ שְׁלֹופָה, wěhārbô šēlūpâ)—God opposed Balaam's journey with מלאך יהוה (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

Psalm 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

פָּרָה: נִצְבֵּה בְּאֶת וְיַתְּרָא
the angel of the LORD standing her into the way
H853 H3068 H5324 H1870

וְיַתְּרָב וְיַתְּרָב וְיַתְּרָב
and his sword drawn in his hand to turn And the ass
H2719 H8025 H3027 H5186 H860 H4480

בְּאֶת וְאֶת בְּלָעָם וְיַתְּרָא
her into the way into the field smote and Balaam And the ass
H1980 H7704 H5221 H1109 H853 H860

לִפְנֵת הַפָּרָה
to turn her into the way
H5186 H1870

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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