

Numbers 23:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when he came to him, behold, he stood by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said unto him, What hath the LORD spoken?

Analysis

He stood by his burnt offering (עֹלָה, olah)—Balak's posture reveals his attempt to manipulate divine favor through ritual. The olah (burnt offering, from 'to ascend') was wholly consumed, symbolizing complete dedication to God. Yet Balaam's question **What hath the LORD spoken?** underscores the futility: God cannot be bought. The presence of **the princes of Moab** as witnesses heightens the drama—will Balaam curse Israel despite God's command?

This scene contrasts pagan transactional worship with biblical revelation. Balak assumes sacrifices compel divine compliance, but Numbers repeatedly shows God's sovereignty over pagan divination (23:8, 20, 23). The burnt offering cannot override God's blessing on Israel (Genesis 12:3).

Historical Context

This occurred around 1405 BC as Israel camped in Moab's plains before entering Canaan. Balak, Moab's king, hired Balaam to curse Israel, fearing their military strength. Ancient Near Eastern kings regularly employed diviners before battle, viewing sacrifices as binding divine powers to human will.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. In what ways do we treat worship as transactional—offering 'burnt offerings' to manipulate God's favor?
2. How does Balaam's question 'What hath the LORD spoken?' model the proper response to ritual—submission to God's word rather than ritual manipulation?
3. What does God's refusal to be manipulated by Balak's seven altars teach about the nature of prayer and sacrifice?

Interlinear Text

וְיֻבָּא	וְיַהְיֵה	וְאֶל	וְיַבְאֶה	עַל	וְנִצְבֵּא
And when he came	H413	H2009	to him behold he stood	H5921	
	H935			H5324	
עַל־לְתָה וְיַשְׁגֵּן	וְיַשְׁגֵּן	וְיַבְאֶה בְּ	לְלִזְׁבָּחָה	וְיַבְאֶה	וְיַבְאֶה
by his burnt offering	and the princes	of Moab	and	and	and
H5930	H8269	H4124	H854	H0	H559
with him And Balak	H4100	H1696	spoken	unto him	What hath the LORD
H1111				H3068	

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