

Habakkuk

1. Introduction – Habakkuk could in many respects be called a little Job. He wrestles with the question of God’s justice in his dealings with humanity. However, while Job asks why the righteous suffer, Habakkuk asks why the wicked prosper. In Habakkuk, God chooses to provide some answers.
2. Author, date, historical setting – Habakkuk is identified as the author, and there is little dispute over the unity of the book. Nothing is known about Habakkuk except the little that can be gleaned from the book itself. The book is set late in the Assyrian period or early in the Babylonian period. Some argue that the unexpected nature of the Babylonian rise (1:5-6) suggests a prophetic statement and therefore a date prior to their actual rise. Others would place the book early in the period after the Babylonians had already established themselves, a conclusion based on past-tense references to their military successes (2:8). Therefore, the time period recorded is probably no earlier than about 640 B. C. since the Babylonian judgment would come “in your days” (1:5), and the Babylonian exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah occurred in 598. The time period was probably no later than the Babylonian exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah in 598 if 1:5 is taken as prophetic.
3. Message – Habakkuk first questions why God does not judge unrighteous Judah for her sins. God replies that he will judge Judah by sending Babylon against her. This raises an even larger question for Habakkuk – how can a just God allow an even more wicked nation to triumph over Judah? God answers Habakkuk in two ways. First, a righteous man will trust God and order his ways rightly, even if he does not have an immediate answer to his questions. Second, Babylon will be judged as well.
4. Structure (modified from Hill and Walton):
 - a. Discourse 1
 - i. Prayer: Habakkuk’s complaint concerning wicked Judah (1:1-4)
 - ii. Answer: oracle of judgment – Babylon to invade Judah (1:5-11)
 - b. Discourse 2
 - i. Prayer: Habakkuk’s questions concerning God’s justice (1:12-17)
 - ii. Instruction from God (2:1-3)
 - iii. Answer 1: responsibility of the righteous (2:4-5)
 - iv. Answer 2: oracle of judgment against Babylon (2:6-20)
 - c. Discourse 3
 - i. Prayer: Habakkuk’s request for mercy (3:1-2)
 - ii. Reflection: the sovereign power of God to deliver (3:3-15)
 - iii. Acceptance: Habakkuk’s trust in God’s sovereignty (3:16-19)
5. Themes:
 - a. We cannot expect to understand all God’s specific dealings with nations, but we can trust that he will bring about justice in his perfect timing.
 - b. “The righteous shall live by his faith” (2:4b). Paul uses this same statement to establish the point that righteousness comes by faith and not works. That is, we must trust God to bring about justice and remove our guilt. We trust him even when we see what appears at first to be injustice, in that God does not treat us as our sins deserve.

Reference:

An Introduction to the Old Testament, R. B. Dillard and T. Longman III, Zondervan, 1994.
A Survey of the Old Testament, Hill and Walton, Zondervan, 2000.