

## Philosophy of History in E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* and Its Affinities with the Biblical Book of *Ecclesiastes*

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### Abstract

Unlike the majority of E. L. Doctorow's novels which present a revisionary account of specific periods in American history, his first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*, deals with history in a more general and allegorical manner. The narrator of the novel is preoccupied with the nature of history and historical phenomena, and this preoccupation pervades the whole book, from which a philosophy of history can be derived: history is cyclic and it tends to repeat itself in a deterministic fashion. Since Doctorow was an American Jew who was influenced by the Jewish tradition, in this paper, *Welcome to Hard Times* is placed within a Jewish context and read from the perspective of this multilayered tradition. Hence, the novel's philosophy of history is compared to the historical vision of the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes*, which also espouses a cyclic conception of history, thereby demonstrating that their visions are almost identical. In Doctorow's novel, however, this cyclic view also serves to repudiate the American Dream and its associated ideas of progress and optimism. It is further shown that the two aforementioned books also share a fatalistic and nihilistic attitude toward life, and their response to the Problem of Evil and innocent human suffering is a pessimistic one, arguing that there is no justice and moral order in the world.

Key words: philosophy of history, cyclic conception, *Ecclesiastes*, American Dream, Problem of Evil.

فلسفة التاريخ في رواية (أهلا بكم في منطقة الزمان الصعب)

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### المستخلص

تتناول الرواية الأولى للكاتب الأمريكي الشهير اي. ال. داكتر، وعلى عكس باقي رواياته الأخرى التي تسلط الضوء على جزء معين من تاريخ أمريكا، تتناول قضية التاريخ من منظور رمزي يختلف عن باقي الأعمال الأدبية الأخرى. فقد غاص الكاتب في اعماق التاريخ و اوجهه المختلفة، و هذا الانغماس في التاريخ انعكس بصورة جلية في روايته الأولى، فقد امتاز الكاتب ببصمته المميزة في فلسفة التاريخ في هذه الرواية، حيث تعامل مع حركة التاريخ على انها حركة دائرية تتكرر بصورة مقدره بين الحين والأخرى. فبما أن الكاتب داكتر هو كاتب امريكي يهودي والذي تأثر كثيرا بالتقاليد اليهودية، فقد تم تناول الرواية (اهلا بكم في محلة الأيام الصعبة) في سياق يهودي. ومن هنا نستطيع ان نلاحظ التشابه في فلسفة التاريخ بين هذه الرواية وفلسفة التاريخ في سفر الجامعة في الكتاب المقدس الذي يتعامل مع التاريخ تحت حركة دائرية قابلة للتكرار. ويسعى الروائي ايضا في طرحه لهذه الفلسفة التاريخية الى دحض فلسفة "الحلم الأمريكي" وما يصاحبه من تطور ثقافي واجتماعي. وقد تشاطر السفر المقدس والرواية في النظرة الجبرية والعدمية اتجاه الحياة، وما يطرحانه هو نظرة تشاؤمية فيما يتعلق بمشكلة الشرّ ومعاناة الانسان في هذه الحياة، فقد اثبتنا أنه لا توجد عدالة في هذا العالم. الكلمات المفتاحية: فلسفة التاريخ، مفهوم الدورية التاريخية، سفر الجامعة، الحلم الأمريكي، مشكلة الشرّ.

## 1. Introduction

Most of E. L. Doctorow's novels are set in a particular period of American history, usually a turning point, recounting fictional and real events in a way that that period is depicted through a radically different perspective, so that a revisionary account of that era is presented (Harter and Thompson, 1990, p. 1). In *Welcome to Hard Times*, his debut novel published in 1960, however, the historical period of the setting is not particularized. It is true that the story, which uses the conventions of the Western only to subvert them (Jaupaj, 2008, pp. 1-4), is set sometime toward the end of the nineteenth century, but the exact time is left vague and unspecified, in a manner that is appropriate for the allegorical orientation of the narrative. Despite this lack of specificity, nevertheless, the novel is replete with philosophical speculations about the nature of history and historical phenomena. In this paper, the authors will investigate the philosophy of history that is promulgated in this novel, through the lens of Doctorow's Jewish background. In other words, the historical vision in *Welcome to Hard Times* is contextualized within the Jewish tradition and interpreted as a reiteration of the philosophy of the book of *Ecclesiastes*. Then, the implications of this philosophy for an American context are investigated. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that the response of *Welcome to Hard Times* to the Problem of Evil or innocent human suffering is similar to that of *Ecclesiastes*, as both of them largely espouse a nihilistic, pessimistic, and deterministic philosophy.

## 2. Literature Review

The critical works on *Welcome to Hard Times* have mostly focused on the ways that this novel has subverted the traditional Western narrative and undermined the conventions of this genre. Under this broad concern, the philosophy of history implicit in this book has also been obliquely discussed, yet this philosophy has rarely been connected to the Jewish roots of Doctorow and his vision. There is one notable exception, however; John G. Parks in his book, *E. L. Doctorow*, comments cursorily on the affinities between the cyclic conception of history prevalent in *Welcome to Hard Times* and the vision of *Ecclesiastes*: "This recurring and apparently inevitable cycle of death and rebirth suggests the pessimism of the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes*, where there is 'nothing new under the sun'" (Parks, 1991, p. 23). However, Parks does not elaborate on this comparison between the two books and leaves this insight undeveloped. Apart from this precipitate comment, the authors have not encountered any other critical work that has analyzed the novel's philosophy of history within the context of Jewish tradition.

Another theme discussed in this paper is that the historical vision of *Welcome to Hard Times* results in the denunciation of the American Dream with its associated ideas of progress and optimism. This rejection of the American Dream has been noted by other critics. For instance, Zohreh Ramin in her essay "Revision of the American Frontier in Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times*" argues that "Doctorow's parody of the Western in *Welcome to Hard Times* is a serious attempt at subverting the American myth of a hopeful future, guaranteed by hard work and on a more general level, the American dream of a prosperous life" (Ramin, 2014, 158). Similarly, Parks notes that "Blue's story presents a serious challenge to American optimism, to the belief in the progress of history" (Parks, 1991, pp. 23-4), which is an implicit acknowledgement that *Welcome to Hard Times* repudiates the American Dream. In this paper, the authors reach a similar conclusion with regard to Doctorow's rejection of the American Dream yet through a different route; that is, the rejection will be interpreted as a result of the

cyclic vision of history which is itself inspired by the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes*, and so Doctorow's work is read through the perspective of the Jewish tradition.

### 3. Philosophy of History in *Welcome to Hard Times*

The dominant conception of history in *Welcome to Hard Times* is a *cyclic* one, which on the surface appears to stand in stark contrast to the mainstream tendency in Jewish tradition and the bulk of the books of *The Hebrew Bible*, which promulgate a *linear* view of time and history. Nevertheless, the authors will attempt to demonstrate that this cyclic conception belongs to another strand of Jewish thought and is no less indebted to Doctorow's Jewish background and upbringing than his more overtly "historical" fiction, like *The Book of Daniel*. The cyclic view of time is associated with mythical thinking, when human beings performed rituals to reenact the primordial time of myths and revoke the linear historical time (Eliade, 1959, pp. 34-38). According to Eliade, the Hebrew Prophets were the first people who discovered linear history and *The Hebrew Bible* (roughly equivalent to the Christian Old Testament) is suffused with this linear historical conception of time (Eliade, 1959, pp. 102-104).

#### 3.1. The *Bible*: A Polyphonic Text

The *Bible*, however, is far from a monolithic text. It is a text which thwarts all the expectations that we bring to it, expectations which are formed primarily by our exposure to books in general. When we open a book for the first time, we often expect that it be written by one single author, that it convey a more-or-less single message, and that it have a uniform style. All of these expectations are frustrated by the complex text of the *Bible*. First and foremost, the *Bible* is not even a book: it is a library, written over a period of more than a thousand years, by the pen of individuals who held different views about almost all fundamental issues in life and lived in widely divergent circumstances, responding to extremely different social, political, and economic situations. In a similar vein, the *Bible* incorporates a vast variety of literary forms and genres, from historical narrative, myth, and parable to psalms of praise, existential tract, and even erotic poetry (Coogan, 2008, pp. 1-11). Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the *Bible* speaks with a myriad of voices. The polyphony of the biblical text is so powerful that it verges on cacophony sometimes.

To understand this polyphonic nature, a cursory look at the structure of the *Bible* is necessary. The *Bible* in the Jewish tradition is referred to as the Tanakh, an acronym composed of three initial letters: Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim. The Torah (also known as the Pentateuch or the Five Scrolls) consists of five books attributed to Moses: *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. These books begin narrating the history of the Israelites by recounting the origins of mankind from the first human couple, Adam and Eve, through the fathers of the nation or the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons. The narrative continues with the story of the Israelites' exile in Egypt and their ultimate flight from slavery and settlement in the land of Canaan. The Torah also contains a huge bulk of religious teachings and instructions for the elaborate rituals of the now-lost Temple, hence its name the Torah (literally "teaching" or "instruction"; also translated by Christians as "law"). The Nevi'im (literally "prophets") is divided into two parts. The first part (called the Former Prophets) continues the historical narrative of the Torah by recounting the story of the nation after conquest and settlement, their rule by the Judges, and the establishment of the monarchy, followed by the chronological history of the kings. The second part (the Latter Prophets), however, is not historical narrative, but prophetic texts by individual prophets, often responding to cataclysmic events in the history of the nation and

discerning divine intervention in catastrophes which befall the people (Goldenberg, 2007, pp. 5-13).

The third and final part of the Tanakh, the Ketuvim (literally “Writings”), is a smaller anthology within the wider and more encompassing anthology of the *Bible*. It is a selection of books with widely differing genres, styles, and worldviews, which cover a variety of issues. Among the eleven books of the Ketuvim, there are loose collections and subgroups, as well. One such collection is the Books of Wisdom: *Proverbs*, *Job*, and *Ecclesiastes* (Neusner and Avery-Peck, 2004, p. 74). These books deal with the human condition in a much more universal manner than the other books of the *Bible*. In them, key Jewish concepts like the Abrahamic or Mosaic covenant, stories of the Patriarchs, the Sabbath, or the Exodus are either not mentioned at all, or referred to in passing. In fact, they can be fruitfully compared to other Wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East, the context to which they belong (Coogan, 2010, pp. 721-5). In this respect, the Wisdom Books of the *Bible* transcend the boundaries of the Abrahamic tradition and observe the human condition from a panoramic perspective that other biblical books lack.

### 3.2. *Ecclesiastes* and the Cyclic View of History

Here, the discussion will be confined only to the book of *Ecclesiastes*. The name of the book is the Greek rendition of the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*, the exact meaning of which is disputed among linguists and historians. *Ecclesiastes* means “one who gathers or assembles” and is the name that the speaker of the book uses to refer to himself. However, it has traditionally been translated into English as “teacher” or “preacher”. The speaker only lets us know that he is a king in Jerusalem, but gives no further autobiographical information to the reader, but according to Jewish and Christian tradition, the book was penned by Solomon who ruled the United Monarchy in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Scholarly consensus, nevertheless, repudiates this contention and dates the probable time of the book’s composition to sometime in the Persian period, that is around six centuries after the reign of Solomon. This estimated date is based upon internal evidence in the text, for example the use of Persian loan words which entered Hebrew after Palestine became a province of the Achaemenid Empire (Coogan, 2010, pp. 935-6).

In many ways, *Ecclesiastes* is an unconventional and deeply subversive book. Indeed, for many centuries after it was canonized, Jewish authorities continued to debate the appropriateness of its inclusion in the canon. After all, the fact remains that *Ecclesiastes* flatly contradicts the pious dogmas about the problem of evil promulgated in other books of the *Bible*, like *Proverbs*, *Psalms*, and *Deuteronomy* (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, pp. 1603-1606). In any case, *Ecclesiastes* has retained its firm place within the Jewish canon and is an integral part of both the Jewish *Bible* (placed inside the Ketuvim) and the Christian *Bible* (placed inside the Old Testament). So what is it that makes *Ecclesiastes* so subversive and has troubled religious authorities for centuries? Several answers can be given to this question.

First and foremost, *Ecclesiastes* is perhaps the only book of the Bible that does not have a linear conception of time and history. A cyclic view of time is characteristic of mythological systems of thought, and the Hebrew Prophets are often credited as having discovered the linear view, or history proper, as opposed to myth (Eliade, 1959, pp. 34-38 & pp. 102-104). The book of *Ecclesiastes*, however, flatly contradicts this linear conception, which is otherwise the predominant view in all the other biblical books, and instead, boldly espouses a cyclic view of time. This might not seem such a

radical break to the modern mind, but it should not be forgotten that the entire Jewish religion is based upon a *historical* God; a God who intervenes in the course of history and manifests His divine will not through natural phenomena, but through the occurrences of history. The entire Torah, that is the first five books of the Bible which are the most authoritative part of the scripture, is founded upon this historical vision. Theology and history are so deeply intertwined that it is hard for the modern reader to differentiate between them in the Torah. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the entire Jewish religion is built upon a certain number of historical events, the most significant of which, perhaps, is the Exodus, which has served to shape the Jewish identity, as well as theology and religious thought, throughout the ages (Neusner and Avery-Peck, 2000, pp. 212-229). With this background in mind, one can better understand how radical and subversive these verses from *Ecclesiastes* are:

What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them (*New Revised Standard Version*, Ecclesiastes 1:3-11).

The quoted passage contains one of the most famous aphorisms in the English language: "There is nothing new under the sun." This statement in itself can demonstrate the cyclic view of time that *Ecclesiastes* espouses. Another famous passage from the book also promulgates this view even more explicitly:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace (*New Revised Standard Version*, Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8).

The writer of the book of *Ecclesiastes* makes it absolutely clear that he rejects the linear conception of time, dominant in all other strands of Jewish thought, and instead propagates a cyclic view, characteristic of mythical thought.

### **3.3. Cyclic Conception of History and Repudiation of American Dream in *Welcome to Hard Times***

The very plot of *Welcome to Hard Times* is cyclic, as it begins with destruction, moves on to reconstruction, and finally returns to destruction. Moreover, the cyclic view of history is the closest affinity between the vision of *Ecclesiastes* and that of Doctorow's narrator in *Welcome to Hard Times*. It is here that Blue, the de facto mayor of Hard Times, enters into dialogue with the speaker of the book of *Ecclesiastes*. The despairing and nihilistic conclusion which he reaches toward the end of the book is so close to the

philosophy of *Ecclesiastes* that one might wonder whether it has been quoted from that book: “Nothing is ever buried, the earth rolls in its tracks, it never goes anywhere, it never changes, only the hope changes like morning and night, only the expectations rise and set” (Doctorow, 2007, p. 164). Indeed, even the tone of the narrator is reminiscent of the mood in *Ecclesiastes*.

However, the dialogue of *Welcome to Hard Times* with *Ecclesiastes* is not limited to a single quotation. On the contrary, the whole philosophy of history that the former espouses is in accordance with the latter’s vision. Blue, in a characteristically American fashion, is hopeful that his town will be regenerated after Turner razes it to the ground the first time. His pragmatism and optimism, again proving his essentially American mentality, oblige him to work hard for the rejuvenation of the town and its rise from the ashes. Indeed, he does manage to rebuild the town and succeeds to a great extent; nevertheless, the return of the Bad Man renders all his efforts null and void. Significantly, Blue admits that the Bad Man had never really gone and that he had always been present, biding his time for the right moment. The second time that Turner comes to Hard Times, Blue sees his reflection in the mirror and contemplates: “He never left the town, it was waiting only for the proper light to see him where he’s been all the time” (Doctorow, 2007, p. 151).

Even more tellingly, as if his parable-like story did not have sufficient clues to convey a cyclic view of history, Doctorow ends his novel with the resurrection of the Bad Man in Jimmy Fee, Blue’s adopted son, and thus comes full circle: “Who am I looking for, Jimmy? He’s gone, he’s riding hard, that mule and rig will take him places, another Bad Man from Bodie, who used to be Fee’s boy” (Doctorow, 2007, p. 164). So Jimmy metamorphoses into another Bad Man and therefore begins the cycle of violence and vengeance anew. What is this but “utter futility” or “vanity of vanities”, to quote the eloquent speaker of the book of *Ecclesiastes*? Is this not a potent repudiation of the American Dream, that most cherished ideology of the United States? It certainly seems so, since the American Dream is based upon an optimistic view of progress which stands in stark contrast to the cyclic and anti-progressive view of history presented by *Welcome to Hard Times*.

Therefore, in the last analysis, *Welcome to Hard Times* does not simply reflect the ancient philosophy of *Ecclesiastes* for no particular purpose; it does so in order to critique, and perhaps even condemn, one of the tenets of American hegemony: the American Dream and the idea of progress. It should not be forgotten, however, that Doctorow’s subversion of progress is not unique or unprecedented in American literature. After all, the primitivism/progress dichotomy is one of the perennial themes of American literature from time immemorial, that is from the very first writings produced by the European colonists of North America. However, these precedents should not blind us to the crucial fact that Doctorow’s critique of progress is very different, and in many ways far more radical, than that of his predecessors or contemporaries. Armed with the cyclic philosophy of history promulgated in *Ecclesiastes*, *Welcome to Hard Times* does not succumb to the Romantic and nostalgic primitivism of many critics of progress; instead, it presents a far bleaker image of history that does not find relief in a supposedly idealistic past. For Blue, the narrator of the novel, there is no Edenic ideal where he can find solace. History is a cycle of violence and vengeance that seems to be repeated infinitely, with no hope of redemption or the expectation of a Messianic figure. The only person who might have fulfilled the

role of the savior is perhaps Jimmy who ultimately becomes the exact opposite of a Messiah by turning into the terrifying Bad Man that everyone had despised and dreaded.

### **3.4. The Problem of Evil: From *Ecclesiastes* to *Welcome to Hard Times***

The Problem of Evil is a perennial problem in all religious traditions. Simply stated, it seeks to understand innocent suffering. The *Bible's* take on this issue is not at all straightforward: for instance, even among the Wisdom Books of the *Bible* (mentioned earlier), there is by no means consensus with regard to this matter. Indeed, *Ecclesiastes* offers a view which stands in stark contrast to the book of *Proverbs*. *Proverbs* is deeply conventional in its outlook and propagates the traditional view of the Prophets: that the world is morally ordered and that the righteous prosper while the wicked perish. This stance is technically called "retributive justice" in religious studies. It is the traditional response of the Hebrew Prophets to the Problem of Evil or the theodicy issue. Simply stated, according to the theology of retributive justice, there is no innocent suffering in the world, and hence no evil, because anyone who suffers has sinned and anyone who prospers has acted righteously. *Ecclesiastes*, however, rejects this idea (Coogan, 2010, p. 733 & p. 940).

In this sense, too, *Welcome to Hard Times* is deeply influenced by the philosophy of *Ecclesiastes*. As it was mentioned, the speaker in *Ecclesiastes* rejects the classic response of the Prophets to the Problem of Evil and repudiates the concept of retributive justice and provides a much bleaker and darker response to the theodicy issue and bitterly laments that human injustice often goes unpunished while righteousness is not necessarily always rewarded:

The wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness. Yet I perceived that the same fate befalls all of them. Then I said to myself, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For there is no enduring remembrance of the wise or of fools, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How can the wise die just like fools? So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind . . . Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun (*New Revised Standard Version*, *Ecclesiastes* 2:14-17 & 4:1-3).

Thus, *Ecclesiastes* clearly rejects the idea that there is justice in the world, or that there is any redemption for suffering or punishment for evil. The very tone of the book is one of ennui and resignation. Even on those occasions where the speaker espouses a *carpe diem* view, the philosophical pessimism is evident beneath the surface. This pessimism, coupled with the cyclic view of time discussed earlier, gives the book of *Ecclesiastes* an aura of determinism in which fate reigns supreme and human will is almost meaningless. Perhaps that is why the refrain of the book, repeated many times in it, is "vanity of vanities" or, in the more modern and accessible idiom of other translations, "utter futility". This, then, is the philosophy of *Ecclesiastes*: life is futile, there is no redemption for evil and suffering, and there is no progress in history, just the repetition of what has already occurred. All of these have clear echoes in *Welcome to Hard Times*. Its cyclic view of history was previously discussed at some length; the unredeemable nature of suffering and evil is also clearly evident in it, since evil apparently recurs indefinitely, with no hope of any final victory against it, as the Bad Man is in a sense

resurrected in Jimmy at the end of the novel. *Welcome to Hard Times* also expresses deterministic views which, similar to *Ecclesiastes*' vision, are the result of the recurrence of evil in an infinitely repetitive cycle of history. One of the most potent statements of this determinism can be found in the beginning of Chapter 12:

Of course now I put it down I can see that we were finished before we ever got started, our end was in our beginning. I am writing this and maybe it will be recovered and read; and I'll say now how I picture some reader, a gentleman in a stuffed chair with a rug under him and a solid house around him and a whole city of stone streets around the house—a place like New York which Molly talked about one night, with gas lamps on each corner to light the dark, and polished carriages running behind the horses, and lots of fine manners ... Do you think, mister, with all that settlement around you that you're freer than me to make your fate? Do you click your tongue at my story? Well I wish I knew yours. Your father's doing is in you, like his father's was in him, and we can never start new, we take on all the burden: the only thing that grows is trouble, the disasters get bigger, that's all (Doctorow, 2007, p. 143).

Indeed, the tone, the philosophy, and the mood of *Welcome to Hard Times* are so remarkably similar to those of *Ecclesiastes* that one might go so far as to argue that the former is a kind of novelistic narrativization of the latter. The refrain of *Ecclesiastes*, "utter futility", can be implicitly read between almost all the lines of the novel, and it is even explicitly stated on some occasions: "I say that was the true end of me no matter what happened after. Sharp as the boy's kick in my side, clear as the pain, was the sudden breathless vision I had of my *unending futility*" [emphasis added] (Doctorow, 2007, p. 131). The visions of the two books cannot be more similar.

#### 4. Conclusion

*Welcome to Hard Times* has great affinities with the biblical book of *Ecclesiastes* and can be compared to it from various perspectives. First of all, *Welcome to Hard Times* espouses a cyclic view of history which is fully in accordance with the worldview promulgated in *Ecclesiastes*, the only book of the *Bible* which rejects the linear view of history. In fact, the Hebrew Prophets are often credited to have discovered linear history, in opposition to the mythic conception of time which is cyclic. However, the *Bible* speaks with a variety of voices and *Ecclesiastes* is exceptional in that it repudiates linear history and affirms a cyclic understanding of time. This repudiation of linear history in *Welcome to Hard Times* acquires more profound overtones when it is placed within the context of American literature, as it can be interpreted as the rejection of the idea of progress as well as the American Dream, both of which are fundamental myths in American literature and culture. Another great similarity between *Welcome to Hard Times* and *Ecclesiastes* is their attitude toward the theodicy issue or the Problem of Evil. They both reject the idea of a just world order in which the wicked are punished and the righteous are rewarded. Instead, they espouse a much bleaker and more pessimistic view, according to which evil can never be eliminated and it is rarely punished. A deterministic and pessimistic attitude toward life is another similarity between the visions of these two books.

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