



4-1-2000

## Bruce Willis as the Messiah: Human Effort, Salvation and Apocalypticism in Twelve Monkeys

Frances Flannery-Dailey  
Hendrix College, jamjam20@conwaycorp.ent

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

### Recommended Citation

Flannery-Dailey, Frances (2000) "Bruce Willis as the Messiah: Human Effort, Salvation and Apocalypticism in Twelve Monkeys," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.04.01.05>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

## Bruce Willis as the Messiah: Human Effort, Salvation and Apocalypticism in *Twelve Monkeys*

### Abstract

*Twelve Monkeys* (1995) is representative of numerous recent Hollywood films that focus on the theme of the end of the world by drawing on standard apocalyptic motifs from Judaism and Christianity. However, although the formal elements of the film share much with ancient apocalypses, the film desacralizes apocalypticism by replacing divine mediation and salvation with human effort, thus relocating the apocalypse entirely within the sphere of human activity and concern. In the transformation of ancient apocalyptic images, this film serves as a pointed commentary on the usurpation of religion by science, the new modern God.

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

I would first like to ground my discussion of "apocalypse" in terms of the cogent definition offered by the SBL Genres group in *Semeia 14*, in which an apocalypse is defined as:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient examples of this genre include both historical apocalypses such as Daniel 7-12, parts of 1 Enoch (the "Animal Apocalypse" of 1 Enoch 85-91 and the "Apocalypse of Weeks" in 1 Enoch 92-104), 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, in which the temporal element figures prominently, and the otherworldly journey, including 1 Enoch 1-36 and 2 Enoch, in which there is an emphasis on two-tiers of reality between which a character travels.

Terry Gilliam's complex film *Twelve Monkeys* typifies both the historical apocalypse as well as the otherworldly journey.<sup>2</sup> The film begins in our future in the year 2035, and presupposes that the surface of the earth has become uninhabitable by humans due to a viral plague that wiped out five billion people beginning in 1996, leaving less than 1 percent of the world's population to survive in a harsh life underground. The memory of this event is laden with eschatological imagery, as the film flashes to newspaper headlines bearing such captions as "Millions Fear End Soon." In the year 2035, a team of underworld scientists

"volunteer" prison inmate James Cole (played by Bruce Willis) for a special mission: to return in time and find the source of the pure virus, so that a cure might be found that would return humankind to the surface of the earth.

In his time travels back to the earth of 1996 and 1990, Willis or Cole becomes a prophetic revealer for the people of the 1990's. Due in large part to Cole's developing relationship with Dr. Kathryn Railley (played by Madeleine Stowe), he reveals the eschatological events to come, like the ancient apocalyptic seers Enoch, Daniel, Ezra or John. The movie opens with his quote:

... 5 billion people will die from a deadly virus in 1997... The survivors will abandon the surface of the planet... Once again the animals will rule the world...

Excerpts from interview with clinically diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, April 12, 1990 - Baltimore Co. Hospital <sup>3</sup>

Although Cole is diagnosed as mentally ill, the veracity of these eschatological cosmic secrets is assured, as the viewer and Cole realize that from a certain perspective (that of 2035), they have in fact already occurred.

Cole is not merely a revealer figure, but - in light of the SBL definition of "apocalypse" - he is also an otherworldly figure, shuttling back and forth between the underworld of his original present and the earth of the past and post-apocalyptic future. As in Enoch's journeys throughout heaven and earth, "cosmology undergirds eschatology," in that James Cole's journeys establish a complex spatial dualism

testifying to the events of cosmic history ( 1 Enoch 6-36).<sup>4</sup> In *Twelve Monkeys*, there are in fact several pairs of two-tiered reality, each of which is intricately intertwined with the temporal element.

First, the underworld of 2035 has become earth, or the dwelling place of humankind, while the above ground earth is reminiscent of hell, a place of destruction for humans.<sup>5</sup> Second, the dismal underworld of 2035 is hell in comparison with the heavenly pre-plague earth of the 1990's, with its "pure air" and natural beauty.<sup>6</sup> This motif is emphasized by a note Cole leaves to Dr. Railley in 1990: "You live a beautiful world, but you don't know it. You have freedom, sunshine, air you can breathe. I would do anything to stay here, but I must leave." This motif of earthly paradise is also captured in the music Cole hears in the 1990's, which is dominated by naturalistic imagery (e.g., "Blueberry Hill" and "What a Wonderful World").<sup>7</sup> Third, the underworld is the source of revelation and judgment for the people of the past, thus constituting an ironic heaven in contrast to the earth of the 1990's. Finally, the hope of the netherworld of 2035 is that through Cole's efforts, humans might eventually return "upwards" to a cleansed and purified earth, that is, a journey from hell to an earthly Paradise or heaven.

This last dualism illustrates that Cole is not merely an otherworldly revealer of apocalyptic truths from the underworld of 2035 to earth of the past. He is also an otherworldly revealer in reverse, whose mission is to bring back information from

earth of the pre-plague 1990's that will effect eschatological salvation for humankind of the late 2030's. This is made abundantly clear after Cole lands in jail during his first journey to the earth of 1990 and mutters "Need to go... need to go... I'm supposed to be gathering information...".<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in its overarching narrative structure, *Twelve Monkeys* is clearly an apocalypse, in which revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being (James Cole) to human recipients (Dr. Railley and the scientists of 2035), disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal (envisaging both eschatological destruction and salvation) and spatial (involving another world). In addition to this overall structure, standard motifs from ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses abound in *Twelve Monkeys*. The Edenic return to paradise envisioned in Isaiah 11:6-9, 65:26, the Sibylline Oracles 3:620-624, 788-795 and 2 Baruch 73:6-7, in which "the wolf lays down with the lamb," is ironically symbolized by the release of numerous zoo animals just prior to the plague of 1997, who roam the earth of 2035 free of humankind.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, the theme of massive eschatological destruction by plague, "predicted" in hindsight by Cole in 1990, is a stock theme of the Book of Revelation (Rev 15:1-16:21). Moreover, James Cole is clearly a messiah figure, and in accordance with his role as eschatological revealer / savior, he appropriately has the initials "J. C." This connection with Jesus is made even more obvious by Willis' appearance in a bloodstained shirt, which, although

partially obscured by his jacket, reads "Chris-." Finally, the culminating events of 1997 take place during the Christmas holidays, and images of angels appear throughout the background of this modern apocalypse.

Thus, *Twelve Monkeys* resembles texts such as 1 Enoch, Daniel, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch both in overarching structure as well as in numerous thematic motifs. However, the disagreements between *Twelve Monkeys* and ancient apocalypses are equally important, as they testify to the desacralization of apocalypticism, thereby making important statements about modern society and the role of religion.

The "sins" in this apocalypse are rampant consumerism, animal exploitation and environmental devastation. These sins are brought to light mainly through the character of Jeffrey Goines (played by Brad Pitt), the mentally ill son of a famous virologist. While detained in a mental asylum with Coles, Goines points to a television and explains the sin of consumerism:

It's all right there-all right there. Look. Listen. Knee/. Pray. Commercials. We're not productive anymore, no one needs to make things anymore. It's all automated. What are we for then? We're consumers. Yeah, okay, okay-buy a lot of stuff, you're a good citizen. But if you don't buy a lot of stuff, if you don't - fact, Jim, fact - what are you then I ask you? You're mentally ill.

The sin of animal abuse is likewise illuminated through Goines' character, an animal activist and the organizer of "The Army of the Twelve Monkeys," which orchestrates the release of zoo animals in 1996 that results in the populations of

wild animals that inhabit the earth in 2035.<sup>10</sup> During another asylum conversation with Goines, saviour of animals, Cole looks at television clips of cruel experiments being conducted on monkeys and rabbits and mutters, "Look at them. They're just asking for it. Maybe the human race deserves to be wiped out."

The sin of environmental devastation in a sense triggers the apocalyptic plague itself. An environmental activist confronts Dr. Railley after a lecture and prophetically states:

Surely there's very real and very convincing data that the planet cannot survive the excesses of the human race. Proliferation of atomic devices, uncontrolled breeding habits, pollution of land, sea and air; the rape of the environment...

In this context, isn't it obvious that Chicken Little represents the sane vision, and that homo sapiens motto "Let's go shopping" is the cry of the true lunatic?

However, he is the agent of his own oracle, since he, the assistant of Goines' virologist father, steals and purposefully releases the virus that kills five billion people. When Kathryn Railley finally begins to suspect that he is the source of the plague, she refers to him as "an apocalypse nut."

Thus, the apocalypse itself is brought about not by divine intervention, but by human action, as retribution for human sins. Similarly, human scientists orchestrate salvation through the all too human agent of potential deliverance,



James Cole. Cole is a reluctant messiah, a prisoner, and the scene in which he is "volunteered" for this mission against his will shows him being cruelly treated before being hoisted up into the air against a metallic background reminiscent of a cross. With dry irony, a female scientist tells him "We appreciate you volunteering. You're a very good preserver, Cole." However, preserving - or saving - turns out to be a painful and impossible task. Not only does Cole suffer mental derangement by trying to bridge two worlds, he ultimately fails to avert the plague of 1996-7, and in the end cannot even save himself. Whether he succeeds in providing the scientists of 2035 with enough "revelation" to save humankind is ambiguous, and is left up to the next wave of human effort. The divine is nowhere in view.

In fact, through the desacralization of the motifs of the apocalypse, the film makes the point that in the modern world, science has replaced God as the object of worship. This is made clear when Jeffrey Goines screams about his famous father the virologist, saying, "When my father gets upset, the ground shakes! My father is God! I worship my father!!"<sup>11</sup> The obvious allusion to the earthquakes that typically accompany theophanies and the disasters of the last days underscores the theme that science has replaced God.<sup>12</sup> In the underworld of 2035, it is scientists who orchestrate the future salvation of humankind by searching for a cure and by selecting and sending various messiah figures, such as James Cole. Moreover, these

scientists sit in judgment over the messiahs as well as over the people of the earth of the past - whom they have resigned themselves not to try to save.<sup>13</sup>

In the dualistic reality of *Twelve Monkeys*, the team of scientists in 2035 parallels not only virologists in the 1990's, but also teams of psychiatrists that include Dr. Railley. Cole, the viewer) and the scientists of 2035 all understand the cosmic and eschatological secrets, and thus know that "ultimate reality" consists of eschatological doom for the people of the 1990's, as well as two different worlds (both spatial and temporal). However, from the limited point of view of the people of the pre-plague 1990's, this revelation of James Cole's is equivalent to madness, a pronouncement that is made by psychiatrists who place this messiah in a mental ward.<sup>14</sup> Since, for the psychiatrists, the only reliable source of knowledge is scientific proof, anything that is not verifiable is considered to be fantasy.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Dr. Railley initially rejects Cole's revelation and diagnoses him as insane, stating "He's sick, okay? He thinks he comes from the future. He's been living in a meticulously constructed fantasy world, and that world is starting to disintegrate. He needs help." However, she eventually realizes that Cole's madness is the truth, and that it is she and the people on earth in 1997 that are in need of help.

In the central pivot point of the film, James Cole - having just returned to 2035 - caves in to the stress of trying to bridge two worlds. He begins to suffer mental collapse and refuses to "know" what he does about ultimate reality. As Cole

is restrained in a hospital in 2035, the camera pans from a paradisaical painting that hangs above his sterile bed to the scientists singing "Blueberry Hill," ironic in its naturalistic imagery and joyful tone. The scientists clearly function as the ultimate authority and continue to decide the messiah's fate, offering him a certificate of "full pardon," that is, total forgiveness. Meanwhile, in 1990 Dr. Railley begins to give up the god of psychiatry for the irrational knowledge she intuitively knows is the "truth." She confesses that psychiatry is "the latest religion," stating "I'm in trouble here. I'm beginning to lose my faith." The dichotomy of sanity / insanity corresponding to the rejection or acceptance of Cole's revelation in fact constitutes the central motif of *Twelve Monkeys*.

In the film, true sanity is equivalent to knowing the apocalyptic future. Dr. Railley delivers a lecture in 1996 entitled "Madness and Apocalyptic Visions" in which she discusses the "Cassandra Complex," which she defines as the condition "in which a person is condemned to know the future but to be disbelieved, hence, the agony of foreknowledge combined with the impotence to do anything about it." In her lecture, she identifies several apocalyptic seers of the past whom she considers to be mentally ill, each of whom predicted a plague would wipe out humankind, quoting from the Book of Revelation: "There are omens and divinations. One of the four beasts gave unto the seven angels seven golden vials, full of the wrath of God, who liveth forever and ever" (Rev 15:7). Later events

clarify that at least one of these apocalyptic prophets was a time traveler from the future, who, like James Cole, was an otherworldly revealer for people of the past.<sup>16</sup> His prophecy was not revelation of the future, but a statement of what, from his perspective, had already occurred. The implication that perhaps all apocalyptic seers are time-travelers (and hence that their oracles are reliable) is suggested in the scene in which a millennialist street preacher who quotes the same passage from Revelation seems to recognize Cole and yells "You're one of us!" Slowly, Dr. Railley realizes the truth of the quote from Revelation, in that the "seven vials of God's wrath" are vials of the virus - visible at a point near the end of the movie on an airport's x-ray machine - which bring about the end-time for the majority of the planet.

In conclusion, *Twelve Monkeys* is remarkable for the breadth of apocalyptic imagery it shares with ancient apocalypses. The two-tiered structure of reality, the figure of the otherworldly revealer, pointed allusions to James Cole as a messiah figure, and themes such as judgment, salvation, forgiveness and apocalyptic revelation clearly point to the relevance of ancient apocalypticism for expressing modern concerns. However, at the same time, the entire sphere of apocalypticism is resolutely desacralized in this modern text, such that the eschaton itself as well as any hope of salvation depends entirely on human effort.<sup>17</sup> God has been replaced by scientists, and although the science of the 1990's is shown to be a false idol, the

science of 2035 is still held up to be the ultimate source of power and knowledge.

If the scientists are successful, the locus of future bliss is not heaven, but an earth purified through human effort and the power of science.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (J. J. Collins, ed.; Semeia 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> The only ancient Jewish apocalypse to combine the otherworldly journey and a review of history is the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. See J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 6.

<sup>3</sup> Cole introduces this revelation to a team of psychiatrists in 1990 by saying, "I know some things you don't know, and it's going to be very difficult for you to understand."

<sup>4</sup> The phrase "cosmology undergirds eschatology" is used by Nickelsburg to describe the spatial dualism of 1 Enoch, in G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "The Apocalyptic Construction of Reality in 1 Enoch," in *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium* (J. J. Collins and J. H. Charlesworth, eds.; JSPSup 9; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 51-64.

<sup>5</sup> This is not unlike the eschatological vision of the Testament of Moses 9-10, in which the elect are elevated to heaven, while the earth becomes a hell for their enemies.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the theme of earthly Paradise repeatedly appears in commercials advertising vacation getaways in Florida, the attempted destination of Kathryn Railley and James Cole that evaporates along with Cole's chances for a getaway from the scientists of 2035.

<sup>7</sup> The latter song is especially important for establishing this theme, and plays both during Cole's visit to 1996 and during the closing credits. The lyrics read, "I see trees of green, red roses too, I see them bloom for me and you. And I think to myself - 'What a wonderful world.' I see skies of blue, and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night. And I think to myself - 'What a wonderful world.'"

<sup>8</sup> As in Daniel 7-12, events on "earth" mirror events in "heaven," and Cole leaves a prison in the underworld of 2035 only to find himself in prison and a mental institution in 1990.

<sup>9</sup> The roaming of wild animals may be an ironic twist on the apocalyptic motif of a return to Eden, cf. Is 51:3; Hosea 2:18; 1 Enoch 10:7, 19, 20; 11:1; 25:2-7; 29:1-32:6; 4 Ezra 11:46; 2 Baruch 29:1-8; 2 Enoch 58:2-6. On the other hand, the image may refer to the post-judgment return to wildness (itself a twist on the theme of a return to Eden) evident in texts such as Hosea 4:3, Amos 5:19 and Zephaniah 2:14-15.

---

<sup>10</sup> For the sin of animal abuse see 2 Enoch 58:2-6; Testament of Zebulon 5:1-5.

<sup>11</sup> Cole later refers back to this statement, ironically stating that Goines "didn't say his father was a scientist, he said he was God."

<sup>12</sup> For example, Exod 19:18; Isa 29:6; Matt 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11; Rev 6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18; 1 Enoch 1: 5-7.

<sup>13</sup> In one of the final scenes of the movie, a female scientist from 2035 is seen in 1997 meeting the environmental apocalypticist who is on his way to spread the virus across the globe. As she introduces herself (in order to gain access to the pure virus and thus to develop a cure in 2035), she ironically states, "I'm in insurance," that is, a business that pays off on disaster.

<sup>14</sup> The lengthy statement made to Cole by a mental patient is worthy of quoting for its ironic implication that belief in another world is tantamount to insanity: "I don't really come from outer space... It's a condition of mental divergence. I find myself on the planet Ogo, part of an intellectual elite preparing to subjugate the barbarian hordes on Pluto. *But even though this is a totally convincing reality for me in every way, nevertheless Ogo is actually a construct of my psyche.* I am mentally divergent, in that I am escaping certain unnamed realities that plague my life here. When I stop going there, I will be well. Are you also divergent, friend?" Likewise, Goines, clearly mentally ill, refers to a prior patient as crazy for requesting T.V. programs that had already aired (that is, who believed the charge nurse could turn back time). Thus, the two mental patients with whom Cole has conversations confirm that belief in another world and time travel constitute insanity, although from the larger context of the movie, this is sanity.

<sup>15</sup> Goines points out that there was once a doctor in the 18th century who suggested that tiny invisible things called germs exist - (the source of the plague of 1997) - but that people declared him to be crazy. Goines then asks Cole, "You believe in germs, right?" Cole simply replies, "I'm not crazy."

<sup>16</sup> The seer is in fact Jose (Jon Seda), Cole's former cell-mate from 2035, mistakenly sent into the more distant past of W. W. I.

<sup>17</sup> This point is made in many other films with apocalyptic motifs, including the film *Armageddon*, in which Willis plays another messiah figure. *Armageddon* is an otherworldly journey in which the spatial element figures prominently. Here the otherworldly mediator is NASA, and Willis plays both the human recipient of revelation imparted by NASA as well as the messiah figure who saves the world through his self-sacrifice. Unlike that of *Twelve Monkeys*, the destruction of the world is an "act of God" in the form of an approaching meteorite, and science is hailed as a positive force for good. However, as in *Twelve Monkeys*, the salvation of the world is wrought entirely by human effort - a team of seven men led by Willis' character attempts to blow up the meteorite. Although there are repeated and sustained references to God, Jesus or the Bible (over twenty), these simply serve to highlight a bifurcated view of divine providence, since humans in the film remain unsure of whether God cares or acts on their behalf. They pray, but it is clear that they will not await divine deliverance: humans must effect salvation from the meteorite by themselves. Thus, in its portrayal of a divine apocalypse averted by human effort, with the added insurance of repeated pleas to God, the film reflects the schizophrenia of much of popular religiosity today. Like the person who believes that Jesus is returning in the year 2000, but who continues to go to his/her job

every day, the characters in *Armageddon* "hedge their bets." In both *Armageddon* and *Twelve Monkeys* the ultimate source of salvation is science, human effort, and the self-sacrificial death of the characters played by Willis. *The Fifth Element* is yet another film in which Willis plays a pivotal role in saving the world, this time by romancing the messiah figure, a female who loses her nerve in saving the world until emboldened by Willis' love.