

# The Scopes Monkey Trial: A Battle of Worldviews

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## *Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee, and its statue of William Jennings Bryan*

Image credit: M. Mueller

The Scopes Monkey Trial, an event that's often called the trial of the century, was truly a battle—not physical like the American Revolution but spiritual. Its outcome cast doubt on the authority of God's Word, implying that either Scripture is true or science is. This has impacted views on faith and science for the past 100 years.

Why does this matter? It is by God's Word, Genesis to Revelation, that we can know God's plan for our salvation. If any part isn't completely true, why would we trust the rest of it? Let's take a look at the 1925 trial to see what it actually proved.

### **The Trial**

In March 1925 the Tennessee state legislature passed the anti-evolution law HB 185, called the Butler Act after legislator John Washington Butler. He'd heard about a young woman who came home from college believing the evolutionary theory and had therefore rejected her religious heritage. Butler introduced the bill in hopes of limiting the dangerous teaching of evolution.<sup>1</sup>

Residents of Dayton, Tennessee, decided to test the new law in court. High school teacher John T. Scopes agreed to be charged with illegally teaching evolution. Two national icons faced off in the subsequent trial—William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution and Clarence Darrow for the defense. They and their teams went at it for eight days in the Dayton courthouse.



*Defense Attorney Clarence Darrow (right) cross-examining Prosecuting Attorney William Jennings Bryan (left) outside the courthouse*

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The trial reached a tipping point when Darrow called Bryan to the stand. He poked holes in Bryan's arguments by exposing his lack of scientific knowledge and inconsistencies in his position. Scopes was ultimately found guilty and fined, but that courtroom exchange presented the Christian creation position as unscientific and the Bible as nonfactual.

Eventually the Butler Act was overturned. Today's public schools generally provide only one-sided evolutionary teaching. Just as Christians feared in 1925, the idea that science has disproven the Bible has prompted many young people to question or leave their faith.

### **The Scientific Case for...Evolution or Scripture?**

In the 1925 trial, Clarence Darrow and his team of attorneys used testimonies from so-called experts to demonstrate that evolution was true science. The supposed experts presented some of the following topics as proof. Many are still used, but the scientific evidence actually supports creation, not evolution. Consider the claims and our brief responses.

**Claim:** Evolution from simple cells to complex life, bacteria to man, is a fact.

**Response:** The trial experts admitted they didn't know where the first cell came from and weren't clear on the process or method evolution uses.

Biological science has advanced considerably since then, and it overwhelmingly disproves evolutionary ideas about how life operates. In fact, ICR President Dr. Randy Guliuzza recently introduced a new theory proposing that God equipped each life form with the ability to adapt to environmental changes using its own innate systems.<sup>2</sup> Modern science supports the Bible like never before.



*High school teacher John Scopes appearing in court*

Image credit: Rhea County Historical Society, used by permission

**Claim:** Ape-to-human evolution is demonstrated by fossils.

**Response:** The so-called missing links between ape and man are still missing. No discoveries show that humans descended from primates, and the fossil specimens presented in the trial and since have turned out to be fully human, fully ape or animal, a mixture of human and animal, or fraudulent.<sup>3</sup>

**Claim:** The geological record proves evolution because simple life forms are buried in the deepest geological layers.

**Response:** The fossil record documents the ecological zones that were progressively flooded and buried in the global Flood of Genesis. This interpretation is supported by ICR geologist Dr. Tim Clarey's research using core drilling samples from all over the world.<sup>4</sup>

The Flood also explains the Cambrian Explosion, the fossil creatures whose living counterparts show no signs of evolution, and the original tissue found in fossils that suggests recent burial.<sup>5</sup> The Bible best explains the geological observations.

**Claim:** The earth is millions of years old, allowing for evolution to have occurred.

**Response:** Many dating methods used to assign millions-of-years ages to rock specimens are based on unprovable assumptions and/or produce inconsistent results.<sup>6</sup> Most evidence clearly supports a young earth and coincides with the biblical timeframe of around 6,000 years.

**Claim:** The tailbone, appendix, wisdom teeth, and other organs are vestigial features.

**Response:** Parts of organisms once thought to be useless evolutionary leftovers are today known to have important functions.<sup>7</sup> They were designed according to God's plan.

**Claim:** Genetic similarity and breeding results support evolution.

**Response:** Human and ape DNA are now known to be 84% similar, not 98% as initially claimed.<sup>8</sup> And variation between plant and animal species can be managed by controlled genetic breeding. This is not evidence of gradual change driven by random mutations over millions of years.

**Claim:** Embryonic development and comparative embryology between animals prove that living organisms came from a common ancestor because their developing embryos echo evolutionary stages.

**Response:** This idea was popularized in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel. He was later reprimanded for using fraudulent drawings. Unfortunately, students are still told that developing babies go through evolutionary history with gill slits, a tail, and yolk sacs, even though this is false.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**



Sadly, William Jennings Bryan died just five days after the trial's conclusion. But his last speech, published after his death, demonstrates the convictions he communicated at the trial remained strong.

Christians know that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” now just as it has been in the past, and they therefore oppose the teaching of guesses that encourage godlessness among the students....Evolution is not truth; it is merely an hypothesis—it is millions of guesses strung together. It had not been proved in the days of Darwin....It had not been proved in the days of Huxley, and it has not been proved up to today.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, it still has not been proven. If Bryan had had modern scientific evidence and knowledge to take on Darrow's questioning, the Scopes trial outcome might have been very different. However, the great battlefield's results continue to spread misinformation, imaginary histories, and ungrounded speculations as evidence of evolution, even though biological science points to phenomenal complexity and design by the all-wise, all-powerful Creator, Jesus Christ.

Christians have science on their side affirming the truth of God's Word. The evidence shows us we can be confident that the Word of God is completely true and lasting, and we can believe its message of life and hope through Jesus our Redeemer.

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Stage image: Defense Attorney Clarence Darrow (left) and Prosecutor William Jennings Bryan (right)

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