

The Scopes Trial (1925)

In the 1920s the Tennessee legislature passed a law forbidding teachers in the state-supported (but not private) schools to teach the Darwinian theory of evolution. John T. Scopes, a young biology teacher, defied the law and was brought to trial in the backwoods hamlet of Dayton. The case drew the attention of the nation. Scopes's defense team was buttressed by the celebrated attorney and agnostic, Clarence G. Darrow; aiding the prosecution was the famed orator and fundamentalist William J. Bryan, who had long spearheaded the nationwide crusade against evolution. Bryan was induced to take the stand as an expert witness on the Bible, and Darrow proceeded to skewer him and his "fool religion."

From *The World's Most Famous Court Trial: Tennessee Evolution Case* (Cincinnati: National Book Club, 1925), pp. 303–04.

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DARROW: Do you believe the story of the temptation of Eve by the serpent?

BRYAN: I do.

DARROW: Do you believe that after Eve ate the apple, or gave it to Adam, whichever way it was, that God cursed Eve, and at that time decreed that all womankind thenceforth and forever should suffer the pains of childbirth in the reproduction of the earth?

BRYAN: I believe what it says, and I believe the fact as fully—

DARROW: That is what it says, doesn't it?

BRYAN: Yes.

DARROW: And for that reason, every woman born of woman, who has to carry on the race, the reason they have childbirth pains is because Eve tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden?

BRYAN: I will believe just what the Bible says. I ask to put that in the language of the Bible, for I prefer that to your language. Read the Bible and I will answer.

DARROW: All right, I will do that.

[Darrow reads from Genesis 3:15–16.]

BRYAN: I accept it as it is.

DARROW: And you believe that came about because Eve tempted Adam to eat the fruit?

BRYAN: Just as it says.

DARROW: And you believe that is the reason that God made the serpent to go on his belly after he tempted Eve?

BRYAN: I believe the Bible as it is, and I do not permit you to put your language in the place of the language of the Almighty. You read that Bible and ask me questions, and I will answer them. I will not answer your questions in your language.

DARROW: I will read it to you from the Bible: "And the Lord God said unto the serpent, because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly

shalt thou go and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life." Do you think that is why the serpent is compelled to crawl upon its belly?

BRYAN: I believe that.

DARROW: Have you any idea how the snake went before that time?

BRYAN: No, sir.

DARROW: Do you know whether he walked on his tail or not?

BRYAN: No, sir. I have no way to know. (Laughter in audience.)

DARROW: Now, you refer to the cloud that was put in the heaven after the flood, the rainbow. Do you believe in that?

BRYAN: Read it.

DARROW: All right, I will read it for you.

BRYAN: Your Honor, I think I can shorten this testimony. The only purpose Mr. Darrow has is to slander the Bible, but I will answer his question. I will answer it all at once, and I have no objection in the world, I want the world to know that this man, who does not believe in a God, is trying to use a court in Tennessee—

DARROW: I object to that.

BRYAN: (continuing) —to slur at it, and while it will require time, I am willing to take it.

DARROW: I object to your statement. I am examining you on your fool ideas that no intelligent Christian on earth believes.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did Bryan indicate his belief that the Bible is the literal word of God?
2. What do you think Darrow meant by an "intelligent Christian"?
3. Why do you think Bryan became the hero of biblical fundamentalists?