Applying the Science of Probability to the Scriptures

Do statistics prove the Bible's supernatural origin?

For years I have been quoting a book by Peter Stoner called *Science Speaks*. I like to use a remarkable illustration from it to show how Bible prophecy proves that Jesus was truly God in the flesh.
I decided that I would try to find a copy of the book so that I could discover all that it had to say about Bible prophecy. The book was first published in 1958 by Moody Press. After considerable searching on the Internet, I was finally able to find a revised edition published in 1976.

Peter Stoner was chairman of the mathematics and astronomy departments at Pasadena City College until 1953 when he moved to Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. There he served as chairman of the science division. At the time he wrote this book, he was professor emeritus of science at Westmont.

In the edition I purchased, there was a foreword by Dr. Harold Hartzler, an officer of the American Scientific Affiliation. He wrote that the manuscript had been carefully reviewed by a committee of his organization and that "the mathematical analysis included is based upon principles of probability which are thoroughly sound." He further stated that in the opinion of the Affiliation, Professor Stoner "has applied these principles in a proper and convincing way."

The book is divided into three sections. Two relate directly to Bible prophecy. The first section deals with the scientific validity of the Genesis account of creation.

Part One: The Genesis Record

Stoner begins with a very interesting observation. He points out that his copy of Young's *General Astronomy*, published in 1898, is full of errors. Yet, the Bible, written over 2,000 years ago is devoid of scientific error. For example, the shape of the earth is mentioned in Isaiah 40:22. Gravity can be found in Job 26:7. Ecclesiastes 1:6 mentions atmospheric circulation. A reference to ocean currents can be found in Psalm 8:8, and the hydraulic cycle is described in Ecclesiastes 1:7 and Isaiah 55:10. The second law of thermodynamics is outlined in Psalm 102:25-27 and Romans 8:21.

And these are only a few examples of scientific truths written in the Scriptures long before they were "discovered" by scientists. Stoner proceeds to present scientific evidence in behalf of special creation. For example, he points out that science had previously taught that special creation was impossible because matter could not be destroyed or created. He then points out that atomic physics had now proved that energy can be turned into matter and matter into energy.

He then considers the order of creation as presented in <u>Genesis 1:1-13</u>. He presents argument after argument from a scientific viewpoint to sustain the order which Genesis chronicles. He then asks, "What chance did Moses have when writing the first chapter [of Genesis] of getting thirteen items all accurate and in satisfactory order?" His calculations conclude it would be one chance in 31,135,104,000,000,000,000,000 (1 in 31 x 10^{21}). He concludes, "Perhaps God wrote such an account in Genesis so that in these latter days, when science has greatly developed, we would be able to verify His account and know for a certainty that God created this planet and the life on it."

The only disappointing thing about Stoner's book is that he spiritualizes the reference to days in Genesis, concluding that they refer to periods of time of indefinite length. Accordingly, he concludes that the earth is approximately 4 billion years old. In his defense, keep in mind that he wrote this book before the foundation of the modern Creation Science Movement which was founded in the 1960's by Dr. Henry Morris. That movement has since produced many convincing scientific arguments in behalf of a young earth with an age of only 6,000 years.

Peter Stoner's Calculations Regarding Messianic Prophecy

Peter Stoner calculated the probability of just 8 Messianic prophecies being fulfilled in the life of Jesus. As you read through these prophecies, you will see that all estimates were calculated as conservatively as possible.

1. The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem (<u>Micah 5:2</u>).
   The average population of Bethlehem from the time of Micah to the present (1958) divided by the average population of the earth during the same period = 7,150/2,000,000,000 or 2.8×10^5.

2. A messenger will prepare the way for the Messiah ([Malachi 3:1](#)).
   One man in how many, the world over, has had a forerunner (in this case, John the Baptist) to prepare his way?
   Estimate: 1 in 1,000 or 1×10^3.
3. The Messiah will enter Jerusalem as a king riding on a donkey ([Zechariah 9:9](#)).
   One man in how many, who has entered Jerusalem as a ruler, has entered riding on a donkey?
   Estimate: 1 in 100 or 1×10^2.
4. The Messiah will be betrayed by a friend and suffer wounds in His hands ([Zechariah 13:6](#)).
   One man in how many, the world over, has been betrayed by a friend, resulting in wounds in his hands?
   Estimate: 1 in 1,000 or 1×10^3.
5. The Messiah will be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver ([Zechariah 11:12](#)).
   Of the people who have been betrayed, one in how many has been betrayed for exactly 30 pieces of silver?
   Estimate: 1 in 1,000 or 1×10^3.
6. The betrayal money will be used to purchase a potter's field ([Zechariah 11:13](#)).
   One man in how many, after receiving a bribe for the betrayal of a friend, has returned the money, had it refused, and then experienced it being used to buy a potter's field?
   Estimate: 1 in 100,000 or 1×10^5.
7. The Messiah will remain silent while He is afflicted ([Isaiah 53:7](#)).
   One man in how many, when he is oppressed and afflicted, though innocent, will make no defense of himself?
   Estimate: 1 in 1,000 or 1×10^3.
8. The Messiah will die by having His hands and feet pierced ([Psalm 22:16](#)).
   One man in how many, since the time of David, has been crucified?
   Estimate: 1 in 10,000 or 1×10^4.

Multiplying all these probabilities together produces a number (rounded off) of 1×10^{28}. Dividing this number by an estimate of the number of people who have lived since the time of these prophecies (88 billion) produces a probability of all 8 prophecies being fulfilled accidently in the life of one person. That probability is 1in 10^{17} or 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000. That's one in one hundred quadrillion!

Part Two: The Accuracy of Prophecy

The second section of Stoner's book, is entitled "Prophetic Accuracy." This is where the book becomes absolutely fascinating. One by one, he takes major Bible prophecies concerning cities and

nations and calculates the odds of their being fulfilled. The first is a prophecy in Ezekiel 26 concerning the city of Tyre. Seven prophecies are contained in this chapter which was written in 590 BC:

1. Nebuchadnezzar shall conquer the city (vs. 7-11).

2. Other nations will assist Nebuchadnezzar (v. 3).

3. The city will be made like a bare rock (vs. 4 & 14).

4. It will become a place for the spreading of fishing nets (vs. 5 & 14).

5. Its stones and timbers will be thrown into the sea (v. 12).

6. Other cities will fear greatly at the fall of Tyre (v. 16).

7. The old city of Tyre will never be rebuilt (v. 14).

Four years after this prophecy was given, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Tyre. The siege lasted 13 years. When the city finally fell in 573 BC, it was discovered that everything of value had been moved to a nearby island.

Two hundred and forty-one years later Alexander the Great arrived on the scene. Fearing that the fleet of Tyre might be used against his homeland, he decided to take the island where the city had been moved to. He accomplished this goal by building a causeway from the mainland to the island, and he did that by using all the building materials from the ruins of the old city. Neighboring cities were so frightened by Alexander's conquest that they immediately opened their gates to him. Ever since that time, Tyre has remained in ruins and is a place where fishermen spread their nets.

Thus, every detail of the prophecy was fulfilled exactly as predicted. Stoner calculated the odds of such a prophecy being fulfilled by chance as being 1 in 75,000,000, or 1 in 7.5×10^7. (The exponent 7 indicates that the decimal is to be moved to the right seven places.) Stoner proceeds to calculate the probabilities of the prophecies concerning Samaria, Gaza and Ashkelon, Jericho, Palestine, Moab and Ammon, Edom, and Babylon. He also calculates the odds of prophecies being fulfilled that predicted the closing of the Eastern Gate (Ezekiel 44:1-3), the plowing of Mount Zion (Micah 3:12), and the enlargement of Jerusalem according to a prescribed pattern (Jeremiah 31:38-40).
Combining all these prophecies, he concludes that "the probability of these 11 prophecies coming true, if written in human wisdom, is... 1

in 5.76×10^{59}. Needless to say, this is a number beyond the realm of possibility.

Part Three: Messianic Prophecy

The third and most famous section of Stoner's book concerns Messianic prophecy. His theme verse for this section is John 5:39 — *"Search the Scriptures because… it is these that bear witness of Me."*

Stoner proceeds to select eight of the best known prophecies about the Messiah and calculates the odds of their accidental fulfillment in one person as being 1 in 10^{17}.

I love the way Stoner illustrated the meaning of this number. He asked the reader to imagine filling the State of Texas knee deep in silver dollars. Include in this huge number one silver dollar with a black check mark on it. Then, turn a blindfolded person loose in this sea of silver dollars. The odds that the first coin he would pick up would be the one with the black check mark are the same as 8 prophecies being fulfilled accidentally in the life of Jesus.

The point, of course, is that when people say that the fulfillment of prophecy in the life of Jesus was accidental, they do not know what they are talking about. Keep in mind that Jesus did not just fulfill 8 prophecies, He fulfilled 108. The chances of fulfilling 16 is 1 in 10^{45}. When you get to a total of 48, the odds increase to 1 in 10^{157}. Accidental fulfillment of these prophecies is simply beyond the realm of possibility.

When confronted with these statistics, skeptics will often fall back on the argument that Jesus purposefully fulfilled the prophecies. There is no doubt that Jesus was aware of the prophecies and His fulfillment of them. For example, when He got ready to enter Jerusalem the last time, He told His disciples to find Him a donkey to ride so that the prophecy of Zechariah could be fulfilled which said, *"Behold, your King is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey"* (Matthew 21:1-5 and Zechariah 9:9).

But many of the prophecies concerning the Messiah could not be purposefully fulfilled — such as the town of His birth (Micah 5:2) or the nature of His betrayal (Psalm 41:9), or the manner of His death (Zechariah 13:6 and Psalm 22:16).

One of the most remarkable Messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures is the one that precisely states that the Messiah will die by crucifixion. It is found in Psalm 22 where David prophesied the Messiah would die by having His hands and feet pierced (Psalm

<u>22:16</u>). That prophecy was written 1,000 years before Jesus was born. When it was written, the Jewish method of execution was by stoning. The prophecy was also written many years before the Romans perfected crucifixion as a method of execution.
Even when Jesus was killed, the Jews still relied on stoning as their method of execution, but they had lost the power to implement the death penalty due to Roman occupation. That is why they were forced to take Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor, and that's how Jesus ended up being crucified, in fulfillment of David's prophecy.

The bottom line is that the fulfillment of Bible prophecy in the life of Jesus proves conclusively that He truly was God in the flesh. It also proves that the Bible is supernatural in origin.

Note: A detailed listing of all 108 prophecies fulfilled by Jesus is contained in Dr. Reagan's book, *Christ in Prophecy Study Guide*. It also contains an analytical listing of all the Messianic prophecies in the Bible — both Old and New Testaments — concerning both the First and Second comings of the Messiah.