

# SPIRITUAL CAT SCAN

## ZEPHANIAH

“Cat Scan” is an acronym for “Computerized Axial Tomography.”

It’s a noninvasive diagnostic tool used by doctors to examine a patient’s medical condition. The technology is sometimes called a “CT Scan.”

*I have a picture of a Cat Scan... (Cat Doctor) Whoops, wrong slide...*

Here’s a cat scan (Look in Cat’s eyes)... nope!

Here’s a cat scanning... (Cat’s scanning the neighborhood)

How about a scan of a cat... (Cat x-ray)

What about a cat on a scanner... (Cat lying on a machine)

How about a cat in a scanner (Cat under the lid of a machine)

Let me try it from a different angle... (Cat from the under the glass)

Attention: No Cats were harmed in the creation of these pictures!

Here’s a woman going in for a cat scan... (Dog replacement)

How about a cat in a cat scan (Lion in CT machine)  
Getting closer...

Here it is - a real Computerized Axial Tomographer...  
(Cat Scan)

*Here's how a real Cat Scan works...* its a sophisticated X-ray that rotates around your body and sends out multiple beams of radiation.

The scanner photographically dissects your body into thin slices that the computer software reassembles into detailed cross-sections. A CT Scan gives a doctor a multi-dimensional view of a patient's insides. Cat Scans are a quick way to examine your chest cavity, or abdomen, or pelvis.

Cat Scans are used to detect a wide range of ailments and injuries.

And there is a section of Scripture I think of as **Spiritual Cat Scans**. The last twelve books of the OT are commonly called *The Minor Prophets*.

In these books God puts the patient on a gurney – a nation like Israel, or Judah, or Edom, or Assyria. He slides the nation into the X-ray tube - rotates around them - photographing slices of what's going on under the surface of their national life - assembling a picture and diagnosis.

On the surface of the nation, there's buying and selling – kids go to school or folks head to work – there're weddings, births, celebrations, and graduations taking place. In most cases it's business as usual.

But God let's the prophets see what's going on inside, under the surface of people's lives. And in many cases

there are spiritual cancers growing - hidden malignancies - that would've gone undetected without the scan.

These prophecies are God's attempt to save people lives.

So far we've studied seven of the Minor Prophets. Today we tackle... **Zephaniah**. And if we have ears to hear, these ancient Cat Scans will diagnose our problems – and get us on the road to spiritual health.

Of all the Minor Prophets, Zephaniah gives us the most detail about his background and pedigree. Beginning in verse 1, **“The word of the LORD which came to Zephaniah the son of Cushi, the son of Gedaliah, the son of Amariah, the son of Hezekiah, in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah.”** Josiah reigned 31 years – from 641-609 BC. He was the last godly king to sit on the throne. He launched a great revival.

Remember Josiah started out **“the boy king.”** He took the throne when he was 8 years old. Imagine, our country ruled by a third grader...

*“Hear ye, hear ye, video games for everyone... ice cream throughout the land... Healthcare reform would consist of chewable vitamins.”*

Actually, 2 Chronicles 34:3 says of Josiah, **“In the 8<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David...”**

If you're a teen pay attention to the phrase **“While he was still young...”**

Josiah's eighth year would make him 16 years old - the age a lot of adolescent males start bucking authority, and sowing their wild oats.

When most kids rebel, Josiah chose to get serious about God.

Hey, why waste the best years of your life on sin and reckless living?

Give God the prime of your life! *Be a Prime Time Christian!* If you're still young... serve the Lord. A lot of teens sow their wild oats, and spend their 20s and 30s pulling weeds. They have to live through the pain, and try to straighten out the consequences of their sins and mistakes.

It's better to sow good seed, and enjoy an early harvest of success.

Its probable Zephaniah was an influence in the early life of Josiah. Perhaps his ministry even paved the way for Josiah's revival.

Zephaniah's prophecy warns Judah of God's judgment. The immediate threat was the Babylonian empire spreading westward across the Fertile Crescent. Judah needed to repent and turn to God or face judgment.

Sadly, Josiah's revival didn't last. After the king died Judah resumed their wicked ways, and the dire warnings of Zephaniah came to pass.

Notice in verse 1 Zephaniah tracks back his genealogy to the fourth generation... There are different ideas as to motive of his family tree.

One theory is that Zephaniah was born into the royal family – a great-great grandson of the godly king, Hezekiah. This would make the *Prophet Zephaniah* a cousin of *King Josiah*. Yet if this was the prophet's purpose why doesn't he come out and call Hezekiah "king" like he does Josiah.

Zephaniah's ancestor could've been a different Hezekiah altogether.

I like a theory advanced by Walter Kaiser. In his commentary on the book of Zephaniah he brings up an interesting idea. Zephaniah's father was named "Cushi". Cush was the Hebrew name for the country of Ethiopia. Its possible Zephaniah was a black man from Ethiopia.

To this day, there's a large contingency of black Jews living in Ethiopia. For centuries these Jews were cut off from the rest of the world.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century AD explorer James Bruce found a tribe of these black Jews living along the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. The tribe called themselves, "Beta-Israel," or "House of Israel." Today, Israelis call them "Falasha" which means "foreigner." It's a derogatory term. If you meet a black Jew don't call him "Falasha" – say he's from "Beta-Israel."

It's interesting, upon initial contact with the outside world, the Ethiopian Jews were surprised all Jews weren't black skinned. Actually, their form of Judaism is closer to biblical Judaism than that of white, European Jews.

They lack the rabbinical traditions of European Judaism. They have no rabbis. Their leaders are priests who claim to be descendents of Aaron.

As to their origin we're not sure... In Acts 8 Philip preached the Gospel to an Ethiopian - indicating there were black Jews in the first century AD.

Solomon had married 1000 women. You'd think there would be an Ethiopian princess in his harem. Maybe her offspring went home...

Some Bible scholars suggest the Ethiopian Jews are descendents of Moses and his Ethiopian wife – obviously, a black-skinned woman.

Numbers 12 recounts the story. Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron opposed the marriage between their brother and new sister-in-law.

They were against interracial marriage and tried to fire Moses.

It's interesting it didn't take long for God to settle the disagreement.

Numbers 12:9 tells us, “So the anger of the LORD was around against them... suddenly Miriam became leprous as white as snow.” God struck her with the dreaded flesh-eating disease of the ancient world, leprosy.

Apparently, Miriam had a problem with the color of the woman's skin.

Now she's got a problem with her own skin – and its pigment is the least of her worries. *Who cares about the shade of a person's skin pigment?*

This is a superficial distinction. And this is why the Bible says nothing to prohibit interracial marriage. In fact, God is working to overcome racial distinctions. In Christ there's neither black nor white - Jew or Gentile.

Today, the only real distinction God sees between people is whether they're *in Christ*, or *outside Christ*... This is why a believer should never marry a non-believer – but the reason is *spiritual* not your *skin-color*.

It's almost humorous, after Miriam was struck with leprosy it didn't take Aaron long to change his opinion. He pleaded, **“Please do not lay this sin on us, in which we have done foolishly and in which we have sinned...”**

Let me say this clearly, prejudice against another person's *shade* is *shady* and sinful – and if you harbor a *little of it* you need to repent.

It's interesting, even in the Law God demonstrated His desire to bridge racial divides. In Egypt there were interracial marriages between Egyptians and Hebrews. In Deuteronomy 23:8, Moses instructs his people not to hate the Egyptians – instead, he makes a way to turn them into Israelis.

He says, “the children of the third generation born to them... enter the congregation of the LORD.” Third generation offspring were full citizens.

Perhaps Zephaniah lists his genealogy to the fourth generation to prove his Jewish identity. Regardless of his color he delivers a colorful message.

The prophecy of Zephaniah begins with a bang - verse 2, “I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land,” says the LORD...

I will consume man and beast; I will consume the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, and the stumbling blocks along with the wicked.” The “*stumbling blocks*” were idols. Israel stumbled over the worship of false gods. “I will cut off man from the face of the land,” says the LORD.”

Bible commentator, J. Vernon McGee writes, “The book of Zephaniah is like a Florida hurricane, a Texas tornado, a Mississippi River flood, a Minnesota snowstorm, and a California earthquake all rolled into one.”

Zephaniah served a God who is serious about sin – Who doesn’t mince words – Who isn’t afraid to judge evil – Who holds nations accountable.

As you well know this past week an earthquake rocked the city of Port Au Prince and the island nation of Haiti. Thousands of people died.



I love the Haitians. I've been to the country many times and plan to help out in this current crisis. I've been in prayer for the people of Haiti.

And I would never put words in God's mouth and conclude this killer quake was His judgment unless He revealed that to me specifically.

But neither would I automatically exclude the possibility? Don't ignore that Haiti is a nation rife with voodoo worship. Corruption runs rampant. In times past God judged His own people, Judah and Israel, what makes us think He wouldn't judge Haiti? For that matter, what makes me think He wouldn't judge America for our selfishness and secularism?

Zephaniah teaches there's not a country on earth immune from God's judgment. All people should *court God's favor* and *fear God's wrath*.

Verse 4 warns of God's displeasure with Judah's idolatrous flirtation.

Zephaniah speaks for God, "I will stretch out My hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will cut off every trace of Baal from this place..." Baal was the primary Canaanite idol.

And He'll cut off "the names of the idolatrous priests with the pagan priests..." The Hebrew word translated "*idolatrous*" is "*Chemarim*." It means "*black ones*." Zephaniah could be rebuking a heresy among his

fellow Ethiopians. Black priests were perpetuating idolatry.

He also rebukes “**Those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops...**” Jews who were charting the stars from their rooftop...

Understand *psychic consultations*, and *horoscopes*, and *palm readers* are all sinful and prohibited by God. The Bible considers it a sin to seek supernatural insight from any source other than God and His Word.

Turn to a psychic and you're inferring God doesn't love you enough to tell you what you need to know. God considers it a betrayal - an insult.

God also rebukes, “**those who worship and swear oaths by the LORD, but who also swear by Milcom...**” or “**Molech.**” This was the false god of Israel's neighbors - the Moabites and Ammonites. The name “**Molech**” was derived from “**Melek**” – which was the Hebrew word, “**king.**”

You form “**Molech**” by taking the three consonants in “**Melek**” - M-L-K - and inserting the vowels found in the Hebrew word for “**shame.**”

Thus, King Molech was forever stigmatized as a *shameful thing*.

Apparently, black priests in Zephaniah's day had turned to Molech, the false god of Moab and Ammon, rather than the one, true God of Israel.

And it's sad, but the same mistake is being repeated today by young blacks. The god of Ammon and Moab is now Islam - and some African- Americans are turning from the truth of Christianity to become Muslims.

Founder of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, was named "Elijah Poole." He was the son of a Baptist pastor who tried to raise his kids in the Christian faith. His son turned his back on the faith of his fathers.

Islam appeals to oppressed minorities because it legitimizes hatred and sanctions violence. The Islamic principle of *Jihad* encourages the use of force - and conquest of the opposition - whereas Christianity teaches its adherents to love their enemies. Conversion is always voluntary.

Tomorrow, Americans celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, father of the modern Civil Rights movement. Dr. King taught that prejudice can only be overcome through love – by peaceful, nonviolent resistance.

The NT and Dr. King's teachings are the very opposite of Islam.

It's probably just coincidence; but remember the Hebrew word "Molech" is formed by inserting the vowels of the word "shame" into the consonants of the Hebrew word "king" - M-L-K are the equivalent English letters.

And ironically, this is what has happened in certain quarters of the black community in America. Muslim

teachings have corrupted the vision of Dr. King, and have caused deceived people to serve the false god, Allah.

Zephaniah continues his indictment in verse 6. He sees, **“Those who have turned back from following the LORD, and have not sought the LORD nor inquired of Him.”** Like America, Israel of old, had become pluralistic. All religions were viewed as equally true and beneficial.

Israel had put the gods of Baal and Milcom on a par with Yahweh.

Tolerance was the mantra. The people had come to believe that no one religion had a monopoly on the truth. The only religion outlawed was the one that claimed to be exclusively true. *Welcome to our modern world...*

This is why Christianity is the enemy of pluralism. The Bible teaches there's only one true God – the God of Israel – and His Son, Jesus.

Secular historian, Edward Gibbon, wrote a classic book entitled, **"The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire."** In the book his description of the final throes of the empire sounds a lot like modern times...

Gibbons states, **"The people regarded all religions as equally true. The philosophers regarded all religions as equally false. And the politicians regarded all religions as equally useful."** Here's 21<sup>st</sup> century America...

Remember, no nation is ever immune from the judgment of God.

God warns in verse 12, “I will search Jerusalem with lamps and punish the men... who say in their heart, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil.’” What infuriates God most is to be portrayed as a God Who’s apathetic – Who has no standards - and doesn’t care how we live...

Zephaniah writes in verse 7, “Be silent in the presence of the Lord God; for the day of the LORD is at hand...” Seven times the Prophet Zephaniah uses the term “the day of the LORD.” And he doesn’t mean 24 hours. *The day of the Lord* is a period in which God asserts His will in human affairs.

Today is “the day of man.” Humans are *having their say* and *getting their way*. But from time to time God butts in. He crashes the party.

When you conceptualize the day of the Lord, think of both the *end of time* - and from *time to time*. The Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem and Judah was *the day of the Lord* for people living in Zephaniah’s day.

In the last days *the day of the Lord* will include God’s invasion of planet Earth. Cataclysmic judgments precede the second coming of Jesus. He’ll return to defeat His enemies, judge nations, and establish His kingdom.

Most of the OT prophecies have an *immediate and future* fulfillment.

Here's how God spoke to the prophets... Have you ever laid flat of your back under a tall oak tree and looked up through its branches? It's difficult to see which branches are on top of the others, and often impossible to estimate the exact distance between the various branches.

This is how it is with God's judgment. Often the prophecies are layered.

You see this in Zephaniah. In verse 10 he mentions a cry from the Fish Gate, and wailing in Jerusalem's Second Quarter – these were immediate prophecies fulfilled when the Babylonian army breeched the walls.

Now listen to verses 14-15. It describes, **“The great day of the LORD...”**

Verse 15 **“That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness...”** This sounds future and more global.

I love the promise at the beginning of chapter 2, **“Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation...”** The Hebrew word translated **“nation”** is **“goyim”** or **“Gentiles.”** Either the Jews are compared to Gentiles or they're being encouraged to join together with the Gentiles...

And notice, they should do so **“Before the LORD's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you!”**

The NT predicts a gathering of Jews and Gentiles before the final day of the Lord. Jesus will come, and all believers will be gathered together with Him in the clouds and taken to heaven. Paul calls the event *the rapture*.

Here it is in the OT, described by Zephaniah in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Zephaniah continues, “Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD'S anger.”

This is “the blessed hope” God gives to those who trust in His Son.

Just before great and grave judgments *come down* on Planet Earth – the Church will be *caught up* to Jesus and hidden in Heaven.

Verse 3 tells us we'll “*be hidden in the day of the LORD's anger.*”

Here's a play on words. The author's name “Zephaniah” means “he whom the Lord hides.” Here we're promised, trust in Jesus and you'll be hidden from God's anger. You'll be Zephaniahized or *raptured*.

From verse 5 through the end of chapter 2 the Lord pronounces judgments on Judah's surrounding neighbors – *the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Ethiopians, and the Assyrians.*

In verse 15 the Assyrians who dwelt in their capitol city of Nineveh sound like a Coca-Cola ad. Zephaniah tells us, “This is the rejoicing city that dwelt securely, that said in her heart, “I am it, and there is none besides me.” Before Coke was it, Nineveh said she was it.

Yet look at the next line, “How has she become a desolation...”

The Assyrians were a proud people that God saw fit to humble.

And how many folks through the ages have followed suit. They think *they’re it!* Beware. James 4:6 tells us, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” He has ways of *taking the air out of the arrogant.*

Chapter 3 opens “Woe to her who is rebellious and polluted, to the oppressing city!” He’s speaking of the once holy city, Jerusalem.

Verse 2 is a strong indictment, “She has not obeyed His voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the LORD, she has not drawn near to her God.” The next verses expose the wickedness of Jerusalem’s *princes, and judges, and prophets, and priests...*

After punishing the surrounding nations, God says of Jerusalem in verse 7, “I said, ‘Surely you will fear Me, You will receive instruction... but they rose early and corrupted all their deeds.” God had granted Jerusalem amazing privileges, but the city never lived up to them.

Always remember... *with privilege comes responsibility.*



Verse 8 almost certainly streaks ahead to the end of time.

God says, “My determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all my fierce anger; all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy.” Zephaniah is describing what the NT refers to as the final battle – the Battle of Armageddon.

All the nations of the world will rally to fight against Jesus and lose.

Zephaniah ends with a couple of interesting last day predictions...

Verse 9, “Then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one accord.”

At the tower of Babel God confused the languages, but when Jesus returns and reigns He’ll reinstitute a universal language to unite mankind, and enable us to worship God with a single voice. And what is this global language? Of course, *it’s English with a Southern accent.*

Actually, some Bible scholars see in verse 9 a promise to restore ancient Hebrew, and make it the global language of all mankind.

This has already begun. The restoration of the Jewish language in Israel today is nothing short of a modern miracle. Prior to this century Hebrew had not been

spoken since the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC – around the time of Zephaniah - when the Jews were carried off to Babylon.

When they returned they spoke the Aramaic they picked up in Babylon. Hebrew became a dead language. It wasn't spoken for 1900 years.

Then around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Jews started returning to their homeland - and they came speaking a zillion languages. Communication was difficult. A Jerusalem journalist, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, noticed the problem, and made it his personal mission to revive ancient Hebrew.

Today Modern Hebrew contains over 100,000 words. Hebrew is the only dead language in history that's been restored to daily use.

Zephaniah's 2500 year old prophecy is being fulfilled in our day.

Another prophecy is in verse 10, **“From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, the daughter of My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering.”**

Zephaniah, the Ethiopian Jew, predicted a return of Ethiopians to the land of Israel. Perhaps you remember this occurring in recent history.

In 1984 Israel launched a covert evacuation called *“Operation Moses.”* The military airlifted 8000 black Jews from war-torn Sudan, and relocated them to Israel. It occurred again in 1991 - 14,000 more Ethiopians came

home. It's amazing this was predicted by the black prophet, Zephaniah.

Admittedly, Zephaniah is a hard book! His prophecy is right, but rough. Yet it closes with one of the tenderest passages in all of the Scriptures.

Once judgment ceases - once sin is punished - God reveals His love for His people. We're told to sing and be glad. Verse 15 tells us, "The LORD has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall see disaster no more.

In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing." God sings over His people.

And this is how God feels about you if you're a believer. In Christ all judgment has ceased. The penalty for sin has been paid in full.

The King is in your midst – He dwells in you. Jesus is mighty to save.

Zephaniah tells us how God treats you... He rejoices over you! Like a doting dad he loves to watch you! The thought of you causes Him to sing!

It reminds me of the Stanley Cup. It's the silver trophy that looks like a wedding cake. It goes to the winner of the National Hockey League.

And when the trophy is awarded to the winning team all the players take turns holding it, and skating with it around the rink... It's obvious the source of their great joy isn't the silver trophy itself. *Just watch how they treat it?*

They toss it, maul it with tapped up hands, slobber on it... They're not worried about smudging, or staining, or denting the trophy. They love the Cup because it represents the hard work that went into their victory.

I think God sees us as [His Stanley Cup](#)... or [Sandy Cup](#), or [Cindy Cup](#).

He's not worried about whether we're smudge-less, and slobber-less, and stain-less, and dent-free. His joy over us doesn't come from our perfections, *but from what it took to win us*. You and I are the prize in God's greatest achievement. We are the spoils of the cross.

When I get to heaven I expect Jesus to pick me up in His strong hands, and skate me around the rink a time or two... *to the cheers of the angels, and the heavenly host, and the Father who sent Him, and the Spirit who helped Him*. He's waiting to hold His Sandy Cup, and rejoice over me!

And I believe He rejoices over you in the exact same way.

God is strict, and just, and judges sin – but He doesn't rejoice in His judgment. That's not what pleases God or tickles His fancy.

God takes joy over people who trust in His Son Jesus.