



**Eliakim Requests Aramaic over Hebrew: History of Languages, Isa 36:11; PROPOBs 6 & 7:
Use of Language & Hyperbole to Control People, Isa 36:12**

E. The Response of Hezekiah's Cabinet:

Isaiah 36:11 - Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, "Speak now to your servants in the Aramaic language because we are the ones listening to you, and do not speak to us in the Hebrew language, in the hearing of the people who are on the wall.

- 1) When a government is ruled by weak and frightened people they do not want their constituency to know what's going on.
- 2) The reason for the fear in the souls of Hezekiah's cabinet was lack of faith in Isaiah's prophecy given to him by the God of Israel, nor did they have confidence in Hezekiah.
- 3) The Traumatic Trio was afraid of dying at the hands of the vicious Assyrians. Their only hope was that the people would remain loyal to Hezekiah for the moment so they could buy enough time to figure out what to do to save their own hides.
- 4) The motivation for political discourse today is primarily designed to save the political hides of politicians. The greater majority of all statements made to the press are written by hired writers whose job is to determine the way the political wind is blowing and then enable their boss to gain momentum by riding the current of popular opinion.
- 5) For example, no politician today, Republican or Democrat, has the courage to expose the Environmentalist movement for its responsibility in the Big Northeastern Blackout (opposition to nuclear power), wildfires in the Far West (opposition to forest maintenance), or the shortage of natural gas that will become evident this coming winter (opposition to drilling).
- 6) To buck the worshipers of Earth Mother would bring down the wrath of not only the Green Monsters but also a majority of Congress who are on the Enviro-Dole. To oppose them would be to lose easy money and, horror of horrors, their cherished seat of power.
- 7) Hezekiah's delegation does not want the people to hear any more of the Rabshakeh's threats, innuendos, and assertions. Therefore, they request that he stop speaking Hebrew and converse with them in Aramaic.
- 8) This indicates that the Rabshakeh is fluent in several languages, not only his own but also Hebrew and Aramaic.
- 9) The Assyrians were highly educated and maintained one of the ancient world's largest libraries, discovered in 1850 by English archaeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard. The details of this discovery enable us to appreciate Assyria's broad interest in literature, history, philology, language, and education in general.
- 10) The Assyrians were a polyglot people whose history began in lower Mesopotamia in the ancient kingdom of Sumer.
- 11) Sumerians were a non-Semitic people of uncertain origin, possibly immigrants from the east, under whom the world's first known true cities developed in this region. Artifacts of Sumer provide evidence of earliest known system of writing (cuneiform), published codes of law, and potter's wheels, among other innovations. (*Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary, 3d ed., 1137.*)



- 12) The development of Mesopotamia's languages of literature and speech had their beginnings in Sumer and flourished during the Third Dynasty of Ur in which Abraham was reared. A summary of philological discoveries of Mesopotamian languages and literature will give us an understanding of the kind of education received by the Rabshakeh.

De Moor, J. C. "Systems of Writing and Nonbiblical Languages." In *The World of the Bible*, edited by A. S. van der Woude. Translated by Sierd Woudstra. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 78-84, 113-14:

[NOTE: See Visuals: "History of Writing & Language Systems" & "Development of Cuneiform Writing."]

[See "Development of Cuneiform Writing": Column I] MESOPOTAMIA: CUNEIFORM SCRIPT. The idea of using clay tablets as the bearers of written information likely arose in Mesopotamia. Before the invention of writing as such ... pictures of objects became written signs.

Soon people began to realize that it was not necessary to limit themselves to the pictures of objects. With a stylus one could picture any other thing in wet clay. This is called *pictography*, a system of writing in which a word is expressed by a simple drawing called a word sign. (p. 78)

Soon after the evolution of the pictographic script, people found out that it was very difficult to draw curved lines in the clay. Therefore they began to use a heavier stylus with a triangular point, making the signs more angular and giving a wedgelike shape to the impressions made by the slanted stylus. This shape is the origin of the English adjective "cuneiform" \ku-ni' a-form\. (pp. 78-79)

Cuneiform continued in use for over three thousand years. As late as A.D. 50 it was used to copy astronomical texts. Many peoples in the ancient world used it and a variety of languages were written in it: Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian. This widespread use of cuneiform was in part due to the tremendous cultural and political impact of the civilizations of Mesopotamia on the entire western Asiatic world. (p. 79)

Sumerian. The oldest legible texts are written in a language called Sumerian. So far it has proved impossible to include Sumerian in any known language family. (p. 80)

During the first half of the third millennium B.C. Sumerian remained the predominant written language of Mesopotamia.

The growing influence of Semitic immigrants led, however, to the founding of the kingdom of Akkad \ah-kad\ about 2370 B.C. Around 2150 B.C. a Sumerian renaissance started, culminating in tremendous literary activity at the time of the kings of the so-called Third Dynasty of Ur. It seems likely that Sumerian was the official spoken language of the ruling class. There are many indications that the Semitic-speaking Mesopotamians maintained their influence, and that therefore a great number of people must have been bilingual at that time.

Though around 1850 B.C. Sumerian ceased to be a commonly spoken language, the knowledge of this "dead" language continued to be cultivated for centuries. In Old Babylonian writing schools, Sumerian texts were copied as a form of exercise; moreover, because texts whose original may be assumed to have been Babylonian were translated into Sumerian, it is fairly certain that at least some of the Babylonian scribes also mastered Sumerian. (p. 81)

Akkadian or Babylonian-Assyrian. The latter name designates the two most important dialects that are recognizable since about 2000 B.C., Babylonian in the southern part of Mesopotamia and Assyrian in the north.

The following division is customary in Assyriology:



[Ibid., Col. II] Old Akkadian (2500-2000 B.C.). Relatively few documents, primarily royal inscriptions and administrative texts.

[Ibid., Col. III] Old Babylonian (2000-1530 B.C.). Many documents, covering all areas of public religious, and private life. Conscious cultivation of language and literature.

Old Assyrian (2000-1750 B.C.). Known mainly from letters and contracts of the Assyrian trade colony Kanish \kah' nish\ in Asia Minor. (p. 83)

Middle Babylonian (1530-1000 B.C.). Especially administrative texts from Nippur \ni-poor\, Ur, and Nuzi \nü' zē\ (pp. 83-84)

Neo-Babylonian (1000-625 B.C.). It reflects the living language, which was being neglected more and more owing to the rise of Aramaic. The literary texts were, however, written in a somewhat archaic dialect called Standard Babylonian. Many tablets were found in the library of King Ashurbanipal \a-shur-ban' i-pal\ [grandson of Sennacherib] (669-627 B.C.) in Nineveh. The ruler was interested in literature and had tablets from every part of his empire copied for his personal collection.

[Ibid., Col. IV] Neo-Assyrian (1000-600 B.C.). Like Neo-Babylonian, it betrays the influence of the spoken language and therefore is found mainly in everyday documents such as letters and contracts. Though for official pieces and literary works Standard Babylonian was normally used, in Assyria a chauvinistic tendency in favor of the language spoken by Assyrians themselves is noticeable. (p. 84)

Aramaic. Between 1200 and 1000 B.C., several Aramaic speaking tribes settled at various places in the civilized world. In the territory of modern northern Syria and Jordan, they became the ruling power, so that from the tenth century B.C. small Aramaic kingdoms were found there. They soon adopted the simple Phoenician alphabet.

The Aramaic immigrants infiltrated many places in Mesopotamia, too, as is evident from lists of names and a growing number of Aramaic loanwords in Assyrian and Babylonian. Consequently, Aramaic-speaking people gained a measure of prominence in the West as well as in the East. It is not surprising that this made the Aramaic language a convenient international mode of communications.

This was true not only of oral contracts but also of correspondence. Thus far cuneiform had served this purpose; however, in comparison with the alphabet this was an archaic kind of script. When a language arose that could be internationally understood, has a simple grammatical structure, and was written in the efficient alphabet at an early state, it was only natural to start using it as the language of correspondence.

Favored by these circumstances, Aramaic became a lingua franca in the Persian period. Many people adopted this language not only as the written language but also as the spoken language. (p. 113)

Official Aramaic. Naturally, the international usefulness of Aramaic was determined to a large degree by uniformity in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. Therefore, a trend toward standardization began as early as the eighth century B.C. As a result, the dialect of Damascus probably became the standard. The movement toward uniformity really began, however, when in the sixth century B.C. Persian officials elevated Aramaic to the position of lingua franca of the vast Persian empire. This language is called *Official Aramaic*. (p. 114)

[Ibid., Col. V] Late Babylonian (625 B.C.-A.D. 50). Aramaic had pushed aside Akkadian as the spoken language. However, Late Babylonian continued to be cultivated as the written language for royal inscriptions, science, and literature. (p. 84)



- 13) From this we learn that the Assyrians were multilingual. The Rabshakeh was fluent in at least five languages: (1) Neo-Babylonian, Assyria's written language; (2) Neo-Assyrian, Assyria's spoken language; (3) Aramaic, the official language of various nations of the Fertile Crescent; and (4) Hebrew, the language of the Judahites.
- 14) In addition, the Rabshakeh was also proficient in (5) Standard Babylonian, the official written language of the Assyrian Empire.
- 14) After listening to the Rabshakeh deliver his first five propaganda messages in Hebrew, all in earshot of the people on the walls, Eliakim appealed to him to stop speaking Hebrew and to continue with Aramaic, the official language of diplomacy.
- 15) Eliakim makes his appeal by saying, "Speak now to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it."
- 16) The clause "Speak now to your servants" does not indicate that he has submitted to the Rabshakeh as his authority. The word is עֲבָדָי *eveth* and although it is correctly translated "servant," it is also a diplomatic term used as a polite and humble reference to oneself. Eliakim was being politically correct.
- 17) The reason for his concern is summarized by:

Walvoord, John F. and Roy B. Zuck (eds.). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament.* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1087:

Realizing the seriousness of their situation the three Judahite negotiators requested that the negotiations be carried on in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Aramaic, a major diplomatic language in that day, is similar to Hebrew. But it is different enough that many of the common people would have had difficulty understanding negotiations spoken in it. The three leaders were concerned that panic would spread throughout the city if the people heard the Assyrian's demands in Hebrew.

- 18) But the people were solid; Eliakim and his fellow diplomats were the only ones who were worried.
- 19) **Propaganda Objective #6:** Go directly to the general population in their own language so that their leadership cannot spin the message.

Isaiah 36:12 - But the Rabshakeh replied, "Has my master [Sennacherib] sent me only to your master [Hezekiah] and to you three to speak these words? Has he not sent me to speak to those sitting on the wall who are in danger of eating their own dung and drinking their own urine with you?"

- 1) The Rabshakeh continues to assault the souls of the people. His efforts are to turn their allegiance away from Hezekiah by means of fear and convince them to mentally submit to an inevitable defeat.
- 2) This PROPOB is designed to not only deny Eliakim's request that the Rabshakeh speak to him in Aramaic but to imply that Eliakim's intent is to hide the truth from the people.
- 3) The Rabshakeh continues his rapid-fire sequence of verbally launched missiles designed to tear down leadership, instill fear, and sway public opinion:
 - 1- In verse 4 he insults Hezekiah by failing to address him as king.
 - 2- In verses 5 and 6 he illustrates the failure of the defense treaty with the Pharaoh of Egypt with the "broken reed" metaphor.



- 3- In verse 7 he attacks Hezekiah's campaign to remove worship sites of the Baal cult and those of YHWH Elohim outside the Temple in Jerusalem asserting that it showed a lack of faith and was an insult to God.
- 4- In verses 8 and 9 he resorts to sarcasm to demonstrate that the army of Judah is incapable of prosecuting a war with Assyria.
- 5- And in verse 10 he tells the lie that God told him to attack Judah.
- 4) In verse 12 the Rabshakeh rejects Eliakim's appeal that he speak to him and his fellow diplomats in Aramaic so that the people on the walls would not become alarmed.
- 5) **PRINCIPLE:** Propaganda is useless if it cannot be comprehended by the target audience.
- 6) The Rabshakeh speaks four languages and can write a fifth among which was Aramaic, the lingua franca of international diplomacy.
- 7) The Rabshakeh rejects this idea. He boldly states that his message was not intended just for Judah's political officials but also for the people.
- 8) His intent for fomenting fear and dread is expressed in the clause that predicts the people of Judah are "doomed to eat their own dung and drink their own urine."
- 9) This crass expression is idiomatic for famine as is indicated by:

Young, Edward J. *The Book of Isaiah*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), 465:

(The Rabshakeh) makes an allusion to men ready to defend the city, and so suggests that the cruelest kind of famine and hardship will overtake them. Ordinary food will be so lacking that the men will be compelled to eat their own filth. The expressions are revolting but the Rabshakeh probably chose them purposely to paint the famine in its most revolting and disgusting form.

- 10) Comments such as this were why the Rabshakeh insisted on speaking in Hebrew. He wants to frighten and intimidate the people into submission. He implies that peace will result and war will be averted if they will simply surrender but if they resist then the most desperate famine will overtake them.
- 11) **Propaganda Objective #7:** Use hyperbole to convince the target audience of the worse conceivable scenario in order to intimidate them into agreeing with your proposals.
- 12) This tactic is consistently utilized by politicians today. If you slow down spending increases for school lunches then children will starve; if you don't teach sex education as early as kindergarten then children will get STDs and get pregnant; if you don't cut the defense budget then old people won't get their social security checks; if you cut taxes for the rich then the budget deficit will increase; if automobile manufacturers don't quit making SUVs then global warming will destroy human life as we know it.
- 13) Once the people buy the idea they are going to die if something is not done then you turn them against whatever their current object of trust happens to be.