BTCON THAILAND

Rice fields

The 2025 Biennial **Bible Translation Conference took place in Thailand** this year. Having it in Thailand made the conference more accessible to people from countries that typically find it difficult to get US visas. The next one will be in South Africa. It makes sense that an international conference takes place in various places around the world. I hope you will enjoy some of the scenic pictures while you read about the conference. We were not allowed to take pictures in the conference for security reasons.

The conference theme was "**Ethics in Bible Translation**". Many speakers presented a variety of topics in relation to ethical concerns. One popular topic was the use of Artificial Intelligence commonly known as AI. The use of AI in Bible translation comes with many different benefits, drawbacks, and cautions. There are several tools out there specifically for use in Bible translation. One product uses the New Testament and a model source text to produce a first draft of the Old Testament. This can be done in very short order. It operates verse by verse. Another product is better at drafting something that looks at the text as a whole. It is not technically AI but makes its draft based on a related language and detailed linguistic analysis. Some experimental projects used one or the other or a combination to access the strengths of each program. None of those promoting AI said the draft that was produced was done. These computer-generated drafts need to be reviewed and edited.

Several studies compared manual drafting with AI drafting. The AI draft could be used as the first draft or it could be used as a reference text for a manually created draft. One study found that where AI was used either as a first draft or a reference text, the consultant found fewer issues with the final product.

Some of the issues with the AI draft revolve around the fact that the New Testament is a relatively small body of literature upon which to base such drafting. Our English AI systems are based on thousands of texts in comparison. AI can't actually think. It guesses based on the texts inside it. AI flat out makes mistakes called hallucinations. No one knows why it does this. However, while the information may be incorrect, the text itself may sound very natural making it harder to spot the mistakes. Because AI can't think, there is a risk of losing some natural creativity that a human being can bring to the table, thinking outside the box to make the text have clarity for the audience.

Drafting with AI typically saves time when drafting narrative texts but does not do as well with the more complex genres like poetry or apocryphal literature. AI can mix the styles between various texts making part of the scriptures more like the Good News version and other parts like a literal version which causes the text to lack cohesion.

Other presenters were advocating that all first drafting should be done by humans. Several reasons for this caution were that AI drafting is based on so little data; vocabulary choices are limited; creativity is limited; translator capacity building is circumvented; intent, collaboration, and social interaction are all diminished.

Additional negative aspects of AI were also raised. Speakers questioned how or even if the Holy Spirit is involved in AI drafting. Others mentioned that AI can distract and circumvent the hard work of understanding the text or building relationships. Still other participants

Elephant refuge and Mae Klang waterfall

believed AI could drive people to languages that have AI and away from their own languages.

Language data can be taken from communities and used in ways the community never intended. At the same time, AI can be helpful in analyzing texts, developing writing systems, and revitalizing language use. We must not serve the tool but let the tool serve us.

AI was not the only topic discussed under the theme of ethics. I attended a presentation on sarcasm in the Bible, on how to translate the names of God and the various implications of using local terms and redefining them or borrowing terms that are foreign. There was a presentation on how much of the Hebrew repetition should be reproduced in a translation. Another presentation came from the eyes of a consultant and the ethics of approving a translation where he and the translation team disagreed on something in the text. Several presenters spoke on how best to build capacity among a people group and the translation team. Others presented on the benefits and methods of Oral Bible Translation. Another presented on the best ways to translate the Psalms.

This conference brought a lot of ideas and people together. **Getting to meet other LBT partners from around the world was a highlight for me**. I met colleagues from Papua New Guinea for the first time, and from Tanzania, Nigeria, Cameroon, Thailand and other parts of Asia. We spent some time discussing how we can support one another, sharing ideas and debriefing what we learned during the week. I met Pastor Yo and his wife who are working in a southern language group in Thailand as part of a number of pastors working with LBT Canada in Thailand who are translating for their people groups.

We also took some time to get to know one another by visiting an elephant refuge, eating new and delicious food together, and observing a cultural dance performance. Thai curry is very delicious no matter the variety. The countryside is very beautiful with the terraced rice fields

Fruit market, jellied water chestnuts in sweet coconut milk, Khao soi curry and noodles

and the forested hillsides. We visited shrines built for the last king and queen. He passed away over nine years ago. She passed right before the conference started. We were encouraged to wear black or white clothing to show empathy as they mourned a much-beloved queen mother. Small shrines were placed in many public places in her honor.

Memorial shrine, Queen's shrine Buddhist shrine

We passed many other shrines and temples. Thailand is largely Buddhist. That and a strong social fear of "losing face" or being shamed keeps petty crime to a minimum. We were free to walk all over without worrying about safety. We enjoyed going to the night markets where there was food and locally made items. The shrines remind us that **we have work to do in Asia to share the love of Jesus.**

Becky

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Praise that both the Maan and Dan teams have finished the final reading for their entire Bibles. Both will be sent to the typesetter soon.
- Pray for the family of Maan translator Mary Donkeh who went to be with Jesus November 7. We miss her dearly.
- Pray for Josephine, Bandi translator, and for others that are helping her plan her educational development for future Bible translation roles.

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