

Growth of the Isan New Testament

By Steve Combs



The Mekong River

The Isan New Testament was first published in May-June 2016. Up to that point, the 22+ million Isan people had never had a New Testament in their heart language. There were very few resources in the Isan language to help with Bible translation. It took many years for missionary Ron Myers and his Isan translation helpers to finish this monumental work. Since its publication the Isan New Testament has seen growth take place. I will allow Ron Myers to tell that story with excerpts from his newsletters.

June-August 2016

What Isan Believers Are Saying:

- 1) "I can finally understand the Word of God."
- 2) "Wow! Where did you get this? ...It's great!"
- 3) "The Isan Scriptures go deep down into my being."
- 4) "When I read the Isan Scriptures, they fill my heart."
- 5) "When I read the Thai Bible, I have to translate it in my mind to understand it. Now, I don't have to."
- 6) "I like this very much. I consider it a real treasure for the Isan people. Thank you." An Isan School Teacher
- 7) "Dear Ron, I am from Northeast Thailand and I say that the Bible in the Isan Language is the best I've ever read and very easy for Isan people to understand." From Isan Pastor's Wife

I have received much positive word-of-mouth feedback from various sources. The following is a loosely-translated letter of appreciation I recently received from an Isan school teacher. Suffice it to say that I was elated to receive this letter, as it confirmed, once more, the intrinsic value of the Isan New Testament, reinforcing the fact that it was all worthwhile.

"Greetings, Pastor Ron; I like this book very, very much. I've never seen a book like this before, because, since Isan is the spoken language of villagers, it isn't used for official publications. I'm very pleased that you have poured yourself into this, because it helps to preserve the Isan language. Isan kids today, they don't speak it as much as before. Growing up in the city, I only spoke a little Isan

because mom and dad didn't speak it with me. They only spoke Thai. However, when I went to school, my friends there spoke to each other in Isan. Consequently, I could understand what they said, yet I couldn't speak very well. I've read this book Pastor Ron; it's like the Isan language that I know. A book like this is hard to find for reading, because there aren't any. Thank you very, much, pastor, that you came to help preserve the Isan language. I have Isan friends in Si-Sa-Ket and Ubon provinces. If my friends want a copy, where can they get one? Also, since my mom and dad are school teachers too, I want to give them a copy as well. I consider this book a real treasure for the Isan people... something to be very, very proud of."

An Isan-Based Baptist Missionary Writes:

"Hello Bro. Ron, Since my last email to you I have given out two 20-count packs at an Isaan Baptist leaders meeting (one copy to each participant); one pack to Pastor WinitKiewon (pastor of Sisaket Baptist Church); two packs to an Evangelical Methodist Church in Mahasarakham Province (doing ministry in various villages). I currently have 14 packs remaining here at the house in Yasothon Province. We are using the Isaan NT in all of our village ministries and it is being received very well by folks across a broad range of ages. It's a blessing! "I want to also mention that my wife is using your Considering Creation booklet with two groups of ladies in sewing groups that she has formed. They come together each week to receive stitching work, etc., and they study a section of the booklet together, with my wife leading. It's been very enlightening so far for many of the ladies, who have not considered God or that the creation gives such evidence of His existence and character. We're expecting fruit soon!" God bless you in your service for the King!

Marty McAnally, Team Leader IMB Isaan Team, Yasothon, Thailand"

October 2016

AMAZING THINGS: I hope this newsletter finds you well. Amazing things have been happening over the last few weeks concerning expanded outreach capabilities of the Isan New Testament. Things that would have been impossible only a few years ago. To do this, volunteer help has come forward from various locations around the world. Allow me to explain. A few years before the Isan New Testament (NT) translation was finished, a brother in Christ from another Southeast Asian country (not Thailand) contacted me, saying he had come across my website, and noticed that I was working on a new translation; the Isan NT. He explained that he is dedicated to helping get newly completed Bible translations into digital format for expanded use through Bible software programs, further assisting in the facilitation and spread of God's Word. As such, he volunteered to do the same with the Isan NT.

Note: This brother has also recently put me in touch with another dedicated person who has a similar ministry; who, in turn, works in conjunction with another person, etc. Interestingly, these professionals are located in various locations around the world; and, they are able to conjoin forces to collaborate their ministry, conferring, sending and receiving files almost instantly by means of the Internet! As scripture tells us, knowledge will greatly increase in the last days (Daniel 12:4), and it certainly has done so, manifold times since the days of the scribes and the Gutenberg press. (Since we live in increasingly uncertain times, I have left out names and locations for their privacy and protection.)

I informed him that I welcomed his assistance; adding that the Isan NT was not quite ready at that juncture, but that I was certainly interested in following through on his offer. That time has arrived, since the Isan NT has now been finalized and published. I recently contacted him and we have now been working together to get it into as many Bible program file formats as possible. This brother in Christ and his colleagues have been doing this for years, so they are very proficient at it, setting Scriptures in a multitude of languages into various popular Bible software programs for use on both computer and smartphone-based applications. Many of the various Isan NT software modules have now been optimized and sent on to Thailand where they are being passed around from person to person, as well as disseminated over the Internet between missionaries and Isan believers. This is another aspect of the Isan NT distribution process, beyond the printed page. Audio is next on the list, so please pray to that end.

As I said: it's amazing... even surreal! Yet, our God is amazing, and nothing is too hard for Him just as the Angel of the Lord Himself reminded Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18:14. From the beginning of my working towards the finalization of the Isan NT, I have seen God prove victorious through it all, despite the enemy's attempts to postpone and halt the completion of this work all along the way, even destroy. Yet, we are more than triumphant (Romans 8:37), assured in God's Word that the enemy of men's souls is a defeated foe; defeated by Christ's substitutionary death on the Cross when he cried out, "It Is Finished," and proven by the empty tomb.

January 2017 (E-mail to Steve Zeinner and Steve Combs)

As you might have read in my most-recent newsletter, I am working in coordination with a fellow missionary translator who was formerly in Laos with Wycliffe/SIL. He, John Durdin, has developed a conversion program that converts text from Thai (and Thai script) into Lao vernacular (using Lao script). The results are the exact same as the Isan NT, apart from being in Lao Script, and will be offered to the Lao populace, both in printed format, in downloadable digital format, as well as in smartphone app format. This will expand Isan NT coverage into Communist Laos as well, where their Scriptures leave much to be desired, being taken from Nestles-UBS Greek text, as well as being a poor translation (Good News). Spoken Lao is similar to Isan, Isan being a derivative of Lao with Thai overtones, in that the Isan region was once a part of Laos, until it was annexed by Thailand a couple centuries ago, during the Thai Ayutthaya Kingdom period.

January 2017

Not too long ago, there was no such thing as an Isan Bible. But that has all changed now! After over two decades of work, the Isan New Testament is finished and making headway into Isan lives throughout Thailand's Northeastern (or Isan) region; both in book and digital format... digital modules for smartphones (which almost everyone there now has) and computer-based Bible study programs. The next major step is to convert the Isan NT into audio format; for listening on computers, on Smartphones, and on CD/DVDs (no more cassette tapes), as well as on Bible audio player devices. Also, the Isan NT is presently being converted from Thai script into Lao script book format; and, into digital reading and listening format, to distribute in Communist Laos.

February 2017

I get recurring requests for boxes of Isan New Testaments and Considering Creation evangelism booklets. Just last week I received more requests; one was from a missionary on behalf of a new team preparing to minister among the Isan people. I am fully confident that God will continue to supply for every need, just as He always has. One need is to do the audio recording of both the Isan New Testament and the Considering Creation evangelism narrative. For all these things, I thank and give God the Honor and Glory due His Holy Name. And, I especially thank Him for you, our faithful and dedicated supporters.

June 2017

Now, after two surgeries on my left shoulder (my right shoulder also needs retreading), I plan to return to Thailand in mid-August to continue the church-planting, teaching, and translation work the Lord has Cheryl and me involved in. As you may recall, we were able to print and distribute the long-awaited Isan New Testament in June, 2016. It has received much acclaim by Isan readers and missionaries alike. Yet, there remains the need to see it converted into audio format; Isan Christians doing the narration. In this way, it can reach many more than single copies can by being played in homes, at weddings, funerals, and other village events before larger audiences, many elderly listeners being illiterate. I know, because I've witnessed it done in that way. And, they really enjoy listening to their own language.

September 2017

You're likely familiar with the oft-quoted verse. "...one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." (2 Peter 3:8) With that in mind, we often get the mistaken idea that God's timetable always moves slowly. However, when the designated moment arrives, God executes His purposes without delay... like Jesus' prophetic statements concerning His soon return, "Behold, I come quickly" (Revelation 22:7,12,20). In essence, it means: "When the time arrives, I'll come suddenly," or "without delay").

FOREWORD: That's how I feel about what I experienced during my most-recent time in Thailand. I knew what my goals were—record the Considering Creation booklet and the Isan New Testament in audio format—but was uncertain as to how I was going to see it accomplished. Meaning, whom could I get with a professional-sounding voice to record the narrative? In short, I needed professional assistance. There's a radio station in the provincial capital of Nakhon Phanom where our ministry is headquartered. I know two of the radio announcers there, both committed Buddhists. A while ago, I had approached each separately about recording my Considering Creation booklet. Both readily agreed to do it, even after telling them it was a story about God; that is, until they read it and became convicted—each bowing out quietly once they realized it might jeopardize their reputation among their peers. GOD'S PROVISION: I needed a Christian with a trained voice and professional equipment on which to do the audio recording. I prayed, presenting my situation before the Lord. I admitted that I didn't know who to get to accomplish the task, but knew that God did. The following day, God marvelously opened a new door. I began to sense that God was working and that I was along for the ride. Upon asking Pastor Pitak, he said there was a radio DJ who had recently received Christ. His

radio "handle" was Baaw Ter, and he is on fire for the Lord. He has a music and call-in talk show weekday mornings where he openly witnesses for Christ, Pitak added. Baaw Ter also leads a Bible study group of new Christians, evidence that he is developing as a leader. What could be more perfect? And, it was all of the Lord's doing!

SUCCESS: Fast forwarding a bit, Baaw Ter was overjoyed at the prospect of recording the Considering Creation booklet, which turned out great beyond my expectations, including nature sound effects and a soft musical background. Click here to experience a brief introduction. Baaw Ter and I have now developed a close friendship and mentoring relationship, where I've been able to ground him further in the faith. Our plans are to make Considering Creation, and the upcoming Isan New Testament recording, readily accessible in a variety of media formats, including: websites, computer downloads, phone apps, flash drives, CDs, Facebook, YouTube, Bible players; even Christian radio. (More on that later)

RECORDING THE ISAN NT: Now comes the greater task of recording the Isan New Testament in audio format, which Baaw Ter is taking very seriously. We'll be recording one book at a time, starting with John's Gospel and the Book of Romans, since we have already introduced these two books in a separate printing. When Baaw Ter recorded the Considering Creation evangelism booklet, we used the recording studio of one of his friends in the adjoining Mukdahan province, 112 kilos (70 mi) to the south, or about 1.5 hours one way. It only took one day. Now, can you imagine trying to drive back and forth to complete the whole Isan New Testament? All considered, it's just not a viable solution, let alone the gas and time consumed and the danger involved in traversing often-perilous traffic conditions countless times.

A VIABLE SOLUTION: You might ask, "What about the government-owned radio station in Nakhon Phanom, where Baaw Ter works?" Good idea, except it's not available for personal use. Let me fill you in about Baaw Ter's radio background. Before he received Christ, Baaw Ter had his own radio station in Nakhon Phanom Province, including a recording studio. It is located in a small block building behind his home. One day, during a bad thunder storm, lightning struck his steel radio tower nearby. It followed the cables down into his recording studio, destroying all of his equipment, mixers, mics, computers, everything! As a result, he was forced to abandon the station, not having the funds to rebuild.

A NEW DIRECTION: Given the alternative, we both concluded that the best solution was to believe the Lord for His provision to repair the recording studio instead of attempting the repeated 70-mile trip. The first goal being, complete the recording of the Isan New Testament; then, reestablish the radio station to broadcast solid Christian content in that spiritually parched land. The day I left Thailand, I sensed the Lord leading me to give Baaw Ter what funds I had left, to help him financially and to begin the rebuilding process. He was grateful and visibly touched. The initial process is now underway: cleaning up, applying new soundproofing materials, pricing new equipment, getting a new electrical transformer and reestablishing service to the building, etc. I am fully convinced that this decision is the Lord's leading, yet there are hurdles we must cross. **THESE ARE EXCITING TIMES:** I was further inspired when Baaw Ter recently wrote me saying: "During this preparation period (before the recording studio is ready), I am practicing reading the Isan New Testament text so that it will sound natural. Because, if I don't practice reading it first, it won't sound smooth and flowing. I want this to be my very best work; for God, for you Uncle Ron, that you'll be pleased; and, so that I can have personal satisfaction in this accomplishment."

November 2017

I departed from San Diego on a two-day international flight, arriving in Bangkok, Thailand, on Friday, November 17 via China Airlines. After a short rest, I took a domestic flight to Nakhon Phanom Province, situated nearly 500 miles away on the western banks of the Mekong River, in the far reaches of Northeastern or Isan Region. There, Pastor Pitak and radio DJ Baaw Ter came to greet me at the local airport; it was good to see them again. We had lunch at a local noodle shop while they brought me up to date.

Baaw Ter insisted that I stay in a spare bedroom in his spacious home on the outskirts of the city, to which I agreed. Of course, the first thing Baaw Ter wanted to show me upon arrival was the refurbished radio studio building behind his home, and especially the newly-completed sound room.

Although nearly done, there was one main component still missing, a powerful computer and corresponding monitor capable of recording and editing the narrated Isan New Testament, as well as preparing Baaw Ter has already started some trial programming for the Good News page in the form of soft Thai Christian music. The one-hour morning program the day I arrived, he had already received a hundred positive comments from Christians and non-Christians alike, saying they enjoyed listening to the pleasant music, the life-giving message, and the spiritual encouragement they received.

Some of the respondents were as far away as Australia and even Thai and Isan Christians working in Bahrain, on the Persian Gulf has blessed these efforts from the onset, to get His word out to a world of hungry and needy hearts in their own language. It will serve an even greater purpose once we include the Isan New Testament in both audio and textual format, as well as *Considering Creation*, the Intelligent Design evangelistic narration, well-received by committed Buddhists. "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword..." (Hebrews 4:12)

As I mentioned in my last newsletter, I have received numerous requests, from both missionaries and Isan Christians alike, to produce an audio version of the Isan New Testament. This was in the plan from the beginning, but the written translation must obviously precede it. One individual alluded that the narrated audio version would prove more meaningful than the printed version! I disagree. Although both will serve a great purpose, one cannot discount the intrinsic value of the written Word of God. We will have both. There's a vast potential readership (and/or listenership) of over twenty-five million Isan speakers, not to mention another seven-million in neighboring Communist Laos, the two languages being interrelated.

January 2018

First, the audio version of my intelligent-design booklet, *Considering Creation*, is done, narrated professionally by Baaw Ter. It's recorded in the Thai language and useable throughout Thailand. Second, he is presently narrating the whole Isan New Testament.

As of March 2018, the Isan New Testament is still being narrated.

August 2018

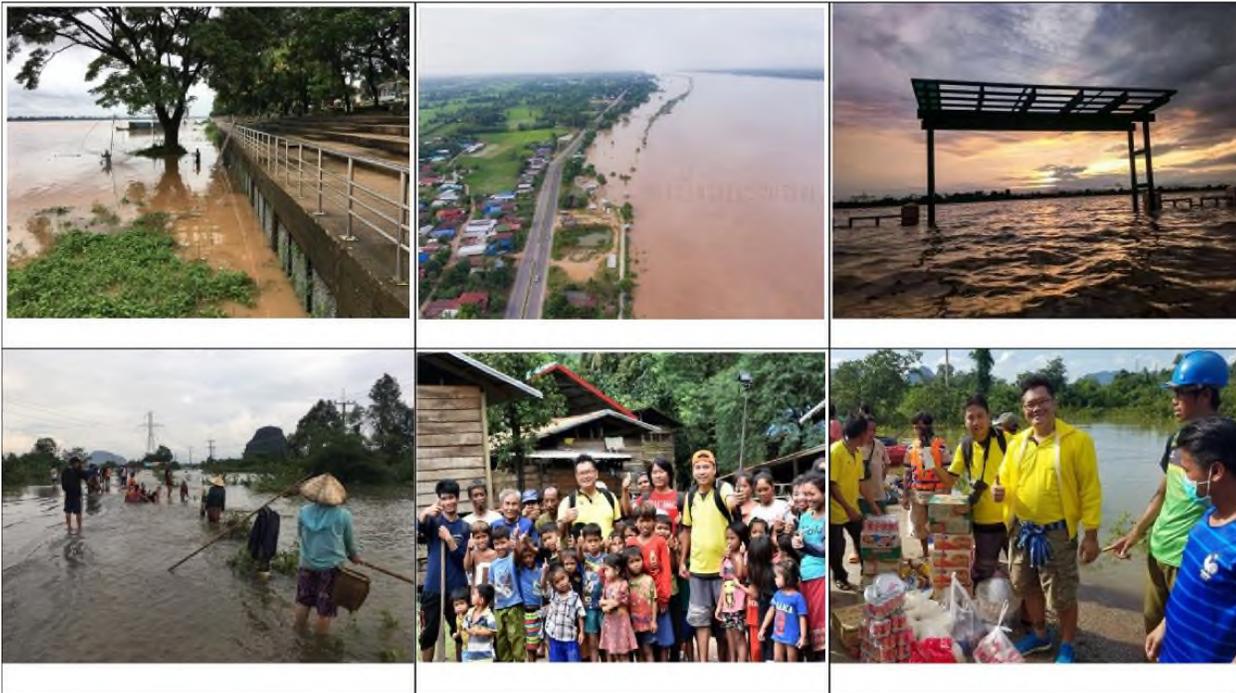
I will be returning to Thailand about the time you receive this newsletter. As you can see by the title, Monsoon floods have hit Northeast Thailand (Isan Region) and Laos for a few weeks now, and the heavy rains have not yet stopped. This has impeded progress for my faithful co-worker, Baaw Ter, in his narrating the audio version of the Isan New Testament. How so? Although he has been able to record at intervals, the sound-impeding material in the recording studio that we set up is no match for daily lightning and thunder deluges, especially with its corrugated tin roof. I was told it was supposed to have let up already, yet the online Nakhon Phanom weather report shows thunder storms for the remainder of this month and likely on into September. This will likely affect my trip, so please pray that the rains subside.

Baaw Ter, my Isan translation narrator, recently sent me a note, saying he felt the whole month had been wasted. I responded saying that God knows, and that he was helping people in need due to the floods across the Mekong in Laos. A reservoir had burst, flooding whole villages. I'm including some of the photos he took of the swollen Mekong, spilling over its banks, and some of the humanitarian work Baaw Ter and his friends are doing in the interim, until he can return to the audio narration of the Isan New Testament. Keep in mind that the Mekong River (one mile wide at this location) is typically 40-50 feet below the bank's rim. It rises during rainy season but usually not this high.

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This gives you an idea of the situation in Nakhon Phanom, where our ministry headquarters is located and where I'll be. Please pray that my time there will be both safe and profitable for all involved. Pray also for the Thai and Lao people, that their eyes will be opened, that they might receive Christ, whom they don't yet know. Pray especially for Baaw Ter's wife, Joo that she too will understand and receive Christ as her Lord and Savior. We want to thank you for your continued prayer and financial support for this vital Isan New Testament audio narration project.