

A Beloved Scholar Dies at Eighty-Seven

By Gerhard Pfandl

William H. Shea, former associate director of the Biblical Research Institute, was born in California on December 31, 1932. He attended La Sierra College from 1950 to 1954, where he met not only Drs. Edward Heppenstall and Tom Blincoe, two renowned Adventist theologians, but also Karen Olson, the love of his life. They were married in 1956, and after both graduated with medical degrees from Loma Linda University, they spent the next three years as medical missionaries at a small twenty-five-bed hospital in Nicaragua.

In an interview in 2015, he said, “I felt that I might be able to do more good in areas where medical care was not so readily available.”¹ From Nicaragua the Sheas moved to a hospital on the island of Trinidad. For the next two years, he worked at the hospital as well as Caribbean Union College. Because the college was short of teachers in the religion department, he volunteered to teach Old Testament subjects. His particular interest was history during the period of the Hebrew Bible and the light that archaeology can shine upon it.

During this two-year teaching stint at Caribbean Union College, he decided that if he was to do more of this, he would need to become better qualified in that field. So he spent the next three years at Harvard

Divinity School, where G. Ernest Wright, a leading Old Testament scholar and biblical archaeologist, was his main teacher. Dr. Shea studied not only the Hebrew Bible, ancient languages, and other related subjects, but he also participated in the excavation of Tel Gezer for two seasons.

Following their time at Harvard, the Sheas re-

turned to Trinidad for another two years, before moving to Michigan in 1972, where Dr. Karen Shea worked at a local hospital and Dr. Bill Shea began teaching in the Old Testament department of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. At the same time, he worked on a PhD in Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, completing it in 1976. Teaching Old Testament subjects at the seminary and working on his dissertation, titled “Famines in the Early History of Egypt and Syro-Palestine,” allowed him to focus on his special interests: biblical history; the history of the ancient Near East, especially Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan; and the intersection of these two main disciplines. He taught fourteen years at the seminary (1972–1986), before joining the Biblical Research Institute at the General Conference. At the Institute he travelled the world; taught classes in many of our schools and universities; and participated in Bible conferences, ministers’ meetings, and camp meetings; besides answering letters and writing theological papers for the world church.



Dr. Bill Shea was a consummate scholar and a gentleman. He was also an excellent teacher, who encouraged the scholars in his classroom to dig deep into God’s word. As a creative thinker and writer, he was not afraid of changing his mind if his studies led him to different conclusions

from those he held at the outset. He published many scholarly and popular articles and book chapters for Adventist and non-Adventist publications. His article on the exodus for the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* became a benchmark for the defense of the fifteenth-century-BC date for the exodus from Egypt.

During the Davenport-Rea-Ford crisis in the ear-

ly 1980s, Dr. Shea wrote a response to Dr. Desmond Ford's attack on the investigative judgment in preparation for the consultation on the sanctuary doctrine held in August 1980, at Glacier View, Colorado. He began the 445-page manuscript in April of that year and completed it in July while teaching at an extension school at Newbold College in England. In less than four months, he presented a strong, comprehensive defense of the biblical pre-advent judgment, focusing on the year-day principle, and the date and nature of the pre-advent judgment. Unfortunately, his response to Dr. Ford was, for the most part, unpublished—except the first 166 pages on the year-day principle, which were published in 1992 as the book *Selected Studies on Prophetic Interpretation*, volume 1 of the Daniel and Revelation Committee Series.

Bill Shea had a special interest in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation. Many journal articles on a variety of issues in these books appeared from his pen in *Andrews University Seminary Studies* and *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*. He also wrote several chapters in the seven volumes of the Daniel and Revelation Committee Series. His commentary on Daniel was published in 1996, comprising two volumes in the The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier series. Seventh-day Adventists have a special interest in the book of Daniel, and Dr. Shea contributed to a better understanding of the book through this commentary and his many articles on Daniel.

For example, he was the first Seventh-day Adventist scholar who provided a convincing reason why Stephen's death in AD 34 had been considered the conclusion of the 70-week prophecy. Looking at Stephen's speech through the eyes of Old Testament prophets, it becomes another instance where a prophet of God brings a covenant lawsuit against His people. Therefore, his death was not just one more martyr's death. He was the last Old Testament prophet to address the Jewish people as the elect people of God, appealing to them not to resist the Holy Spirit, as their fathers had done (Acts 7:51). The prophets who followed Stephen were prophets to the *Christian church*, not to the nation of Israel.²

Shea was also the first to identify the prince in "the people of the prince who is to come" (Dan 9:26) as Jesus Christ. Generally, the prince in this verse is thought to refer to Titus and the Romans in AD 70. Bill Shea, however, taught that the verse pattern indicates that this prince also refers to Jesus.

- 1. v. 25 Messiah (*mashiach*) Prince (*nagid*) A + B
- 2. v. 26a Messiah (*mashiach*) -- A -
- 3. v. 26b -- Prince (*nagid*) - B

According to Shea this pattern suggests that all three references are to the same Messiah Prince, designated by the first occurrence of this word pair in Daniel 9:25. Thus "the people of the prince who is to come"

refers to the people of the Messiah"—that is, the Jews. This unique interpretation raises some questions about the Jews and their involvement in the destruction of the sanctuary in AD 70. Therefore, other interpreters favored the interpretation that this is a reference to the Romans under Titus who destroyed the temple.³

Bill Shea was a brilliant Old Testament scholar and historian, well known even among non-Adventist biblical scholars, but he was first of all a loyal Seventh-day Adventist and defender of the faith. Because of his excellent contributions in the area of biblical apocalyptic, we now understand the books of Daniel and Revelation today better than we did before.

During the interview in 2015, he was asked what recommendations he could give to church members on how to read the Scriptures. He answered,

There are two main ways to read the Bible. One is an intensive scholarly way. For that approach, I use what has been called the historical-grammatical method. This means that the reader must pay close attention to the analysis of the words present in the original language. The historical setting and the literary structure of the text must also be taken into account. Of course, many scholarly tools can be used for such a purpose. These include concordances, dictionaries, commentaries, and encyclopedias.

The average reader may not wish to go into such depth. In that case, one can read simply for personal devotional or spiritual benefit. One way in which to read the Bible for this purpose is to read the passage or book that one is delving into several times. Each time it is read, more will appear of meaning to the reader. Also, as one reads, one should look for keywords. These are the words that are used more frequently in the passage. The Bible writer has used these words over and over again because he wishes to emphasize them. One can take each of these occurrences and see just how the term is used in each case. That will give the reader an idea of the range of meaning in these words. All of these different avenues lead up to the idea that this is God's Word, and through it, He is speaking to us.⁴

On a personal note, Bill was my major professor and a member of my doctoral committee at Andrews University. I spent many hours in his classroom and enjoyed every minute of it. I learned a lot from him and had the privilege of being his successor at the Biblical Research Institute when he retired in 1999. Even after he retired, I had the pleasure of traveling with him to various countries holding Bible conferences and ministers' meetings. He was truly Christ's ambassador, preaching and teaching the word of God that he loved.

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¹ Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Remembering William Shea: “Through Faith in God’s Word I have Found Peace” in *Adventist Review*, February 20, 2020 <https://www.adventistreview.org/remembering-william-shea-through-faith-in-gods-word-i-have-found-peace> (accessed: 04-07-2020).

² William H. Shea, *Daniel 7–12*, The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1996), 59.

³ *Ibid.*, 75–76.

⁴ Rodríguez, *Adventist Review*, February 20, 2020.