

## RESOLVING THE CONFUSION IN REVELATION 6:11

EDWIN REYNOLDS  
Southern Adventist University

### *Abstract*

In most English versions, Revelation 6:11 includes an interpolation (“the number of”) that changes the meaning of the verse. This article evaluates the evidence for changes in the reading and interpretation of the text and the grammatical problems introduced by the interpolation, looking closely at the Greek grammar and syntax of the passage, which does not allow for the interpolation. Then the literary-historical problems with the interpolation are considered, noting the assumptions behind the interpolation and their weaknesses. Finally, the theological problems created by the interpolation are observed. I conclude that the interpolation is unfounded and attempt to address the intended theological understanding of the verse. The idea of completion or perfection is not related to a certain number of people but to the character of the fellow servants and other believers who are to be killed as the plaintive martyrs were.

*Keywords:* Rev 6:11, martyrs, number, completed, perfected, theodicy.

### *Introduction*

Almost all English versions of Rev 6:11 contain an interpolation not found in any version of the Greek text. In the English Standard Version, the verse reads, “Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”<sup>1</sup> The interpolation is “the number of.” It alters the meaning of the text and promotes a theological idea that creates a problem for biblical eschatology. It is the purpose of this article to address this problem not only grammatically but also literary-historically and theologically.

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical quotations in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

*The Textual Problem and Its Interpretation*

The unit under consideration is the fifth seal among the opening of the seven seals on the scroll that the Lamb took from the right hand of the One seated on the throne in Rev 5:7 and began to open beginning in 6:1. When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, John saw under the altar<sup>2</sup> the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony that they held. These martyred persons—or their spilled blood, like Abel’s—metaphorically cried out to God for justice: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:10).<sup>3</sup> Verse 11 is God’s response to this question. First, he gives a white robe to each of them. Then, he instructs them that they should rest a little while longer, “until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be completed.” The problem is that the added words “the number of” are not found in the Greek. They are inserted, and this seems to significantly alter the meaning of the text.

Although there is nothing in the Greek text about a number, the idea of a number is supplied by most English translations and most commentators. For example, except for the KJV and a few others, most Bible versions contain the interpolated words.<sup>4</sup> In addition, most commentators also include the words in question. Jon Paulien is one of the few who clearly repudiates the interpolation.<sup>5</sup> David Aune very strongly supports the interpolation, giving the translation as “lit. ‘until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they were was complete.’”<sup>6</sup> His reason for this translation is that “in early Judaism, the view that the *numerus iustorum*, ‘number of the righteous,’ has been predetermined by God is first expressed clearly in apocalypses nearly contemporary with Revelation (1 *Enoch* 37–71; 4 *Ezra*;

<sup>2</sup>This is without doubt an allusion to the altar of sacrifice, probably alluding also to the slaughter of Abel by his brother Cain, as recorded in Gen 4:3–10, which became a prototype of all subsequent martyrdoms (1 John 3:12) and is the first recorded incident in which God answered the cry of the victim’s blood for justice.

<sup>3</sup>This cry for justice is a recurring theme of theodicy in Scripture. (See, e.g., Gen 18:20–21; Exod 3:7–9; 22:23; 2 Chr 20:9; Neh 9:9; Job 34:28; Pss 9:12; 18:6; 34:17; 106:44; 107:6, 13, 19, 28; Isa 30:19; Jonah 2:2; Hab 1:2).

<sup>4</sup>The Common English Bible (CEB, 2011) and God’s Word to the Nations (GWN, 2003) are the only modern versions I was able to locate that do not include the interpolation. The Darby Bible (DBY, 1884/1890) is an older version that does the same.

<sup>5</sup>Jon Paulien, *The Gospel from Patmos: Everyday Insights for Living from the Last Book of the Bible* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2007), 140.

<sup>6</sup>David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 411.

2 *Apocalypse of Baruch*).<sup>7</sup> This rationale will be discussed further below; however, this is the position that most commentators take. Craig Keener, for example, writes, “That the full number of martyrs had to be completed before the end was probably a familiar apocalyptic theme to the churches in Asia (1 En. 47:2–4; 4 Ezra 4:35–37). More than this, it reflects biblical sensibilities about justice and the cost of the gospel.”<sup>8</sup> Another example is found in Paige Patterson’s comments:

The language ... suggests that there are a specified number of martyrs from the tribulation that God had ordained. While this seems strange to modern ears, God may well have ordained that in his providences. Or the expression may mean no more than that the final acts of God’s judgment as seen in the pairing of the bowls of wrath will not come until the closing days of the tribulation. By then, all who will have faced martyrdom will have joined their brothers and fellow servants around the altar.<sup>9</sup>

The confusion increases with a number of scholars who attempt to play both sides. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* equivocates, “That is, the number should be completed (see RSV). This does not mean that Providence has decreed that a specific number should be martyred.”<sup>10</sup> Beatrice Neall says, “From the text it is not clear whether their *number* or *character* is to be made complete, since the word *number* is not in the Greek text.”<sup>11</sup> So while she notes that the interpolation is lacking, she sees no grammatical problem with the addition. Joseph Mangina also notes the lack of the wording in Greek, but goes on to argue for the idea nonetheless, though he says that it may not be “an absolutely fixed and determined number.”<sup>12</sup> George E. Ladd hedges a bit, saying, “They must wait in patience **until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete.** [emphasis in original] This statement is surely not to be understood in any

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 412. Aune also refers to the Pistis Sophia, in which “the phrase ‘the number of perfect souls is completed’ (or its equivalent) occurs frequently...and obviously refers to Gnostics” (Ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 218.

<sup>9</sup> Paige Patterson, *Revelation: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC 39 (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 185.

<sup>10</sup> “Should Be Fulfilled [Rev 6:11],” *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Commentary Reference Series, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1980), 7:779.

<sup>11</sup> Beatrice S. Neall, “Sealed Saints and the Tribulation,” in *Symposium on Revelation, Book 1: Introductory and Exegetical Studies*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 6 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 249.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), 104.

mathematical way, as though God had decreed that there must be a certain number of martyrs, and when this number was slain, the end would come.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Ranko Stefanovic, while first stating that the number might be inferred, based largely on popular Jewish tradition, adds that evidence elsewhere in Revelation (7:13–14; 19:7–8) supports the idea that the fellow servants are to be made complete with reference to character, as the martyrs have been. He concludes, “Revelation transcends the popular Jewish understanding. The text states that the martyrs underneath the altar must rest until their fellow servants, that is, their brothers who are about to be killed, might be made complete with reference to character, as they themselves have been made complete or perfect in character.”<sup>14</sup> Paulien writes, “The word ‘number’ isn’t in the original. Instead . . . the translators have put it in to make sense of the passage. But the passage does make sense as it is. The ‘fellow servants’ are being ‘completed,’ perhaps a reference to their character in the final crisis of earth’s history (Rev. 19:7–8).”<sup>15</sup> Sigve Tonstad integrates “[the number]” and “[the number of]” into his translation of the passage, acknowledging that it is an interpolation while at the same time implying that it belongs to the syntax of the text. Then he goes on to assert,

The notion that a numerical goal must be reached before the sordid chapter can be closed must not be taken literally. The process running to completion does not unfold according to an arithmetic measure, but there is an underlying reason.<sup>16</sup>

So the reader is left to wonder whether the interpolation has merit or not.

#### *The Grammatical Problem*

As a matter of fact, the insertion, or interpolation, goes contrary to the grammar of the Greek text. I have not found this problem discussed in any of the many commentaries I have consulted, yet it is an important detail to consider for any correct reading of the text.

While “number” is singular, the verb is plural, meaning that “the number” cannot be the intended subject of the verb, either explicit or implied. Nor is “their fellow servants and their brethren” in the genitive case, as would be required if they were the object of the preposition “of.” Rather, both “their fellow servants” and “their brethren” are found in the nominative case and function as the compound subject of the plural verb. So it is very clear

<sup>13</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 106.

<sup>14</sup> Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009), 245.

<sup>15</sup> Paulien, *The Gospel from Patmos*, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 127-28.

grammatically that the added interpolation does not belong to the text, but has been forced upon it. The English translation should read instead, “And a white robe was given to each of them, and it was said to them that they should rest yet a short time, until both their fellow servants and their brethren, who were about to be killed as also they *had been*, were made perfect.”

The main verb in Greek is *plērōthōsin*, which is the aorist passive subjunctive third person plural form of the verb *plēroō*. Aune says that “this verb is extremely problematic.”<sup>17</sup> *Plēroō* is most often used to indicate filling full (*plērēs*) or fulfilling, but it is sometimes used to signify bringing something to completion or perfection.<sup>18</sup> Local context, of course, must be the determining factor for the meaning in any text. Here the subject of the sentence is people who are about to be killed, just as the slain martyrs had been. God is asking the martyrs to wait a little longer until these others should reach a certain state that God intends for them. That state may be inferred from the parallel in Heb 11:40, where God has something better in mind “for us”—namely, that those who died in faith, often as martyrs (vv.35–39), “apart from us they should not be made perfect.” Although the Greek word used there in Hebrews is a different word, *teleiōthōsin*, it is almost a synonym, sometimes used like *plērōthōsin* in this type of context.<sup>19</sup> *Teleiōō* signifies achieving a goal, completing, accomplishing, bringing to an end (*telos*), or reaching perfection (*teleios*).<sup>20</sup> A good example of

<sup>17</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 412. Aune discusses the variant readings and their implications. The best-supported reading is the one found in the text of Nestle-Aland and UBSGNT (*plērōthōsin*), which is both passive and typically intransitive. The primary variant readings were changed to active, transitive forms, he says, because the scribes felt that the verb needed an object like *ton dromon*, “course,” as in Acts 13:25, or possibly *ton arithmon*, “number,” as in some Jewish documents (*Revelation 6–16*, 385). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* places Rev 6:11 in either of these two active categories (BDAG, s.v. πληρόω). However, the grammatical, textual, and contextual evidence supports the intransitive, passive reading (as a divine passive with God as perfecter) in Rev 6:11.

<sup>18</sup> BDAG, s.v. πληρόω. When used in reference to a person, the verb speaks of filling someone with powers, qualities, etc. But when used of persons absolutely, without an object, it suggests a state of completeness. In this context, this would mean perfection of character (BDAG, s.v. πληρόω).

<sup>19</sup> There are many parallels in the translation of these terms in various versions of the biblical text, and there is also evidence in literature to support their similarity in meaning in certain contexts. See BDAG, s.v. πληρόω, τελειόω; William D. Mounce, ed., *Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), s.v. “Complete,” “Perfect”; Warren C. Trenchard, *Complete Vocabulary Guide to the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), s.v. πληρόω, τελειόω.

<sup>20</sup> BDAG, s.v. τελειόω. Paulien says that “the passage does make sense as it is. The ‘fellow-servants’ are being ‘completed,’ perhaps a reference to their character in the final crisis of earth’s history (Rev. 19:7–8)” (*The Gospel from Patmos*, 141).

the similarity is found in Rev 3:2 (NKJV): “I have not found your works perfect before God,” where “perfect” is *peplērōmena*, from *plērōō*. Col 4:12 makes the two terms virtual synonyms: “that you may stand perfect and complete [τέλειοι καὶ πεπληροφορημένοι] in all the will of God” (NKJV).<sup>21</sup>

In summary, from the grammatical point of view, there is no merit in the interpolation of adding the words “the number of” into this verse, despite the fact that most scholars accept the interpolation without acknowledging the fact that it does not fit the text grammatically.<sup>22</sup> The point is not that God is waiting for a particular number of martyrs to be reached. Rather, he is waiting for others to achieve a state of perfect faith and trust in God, or faithfulness, to the point that they too will be prepared to lay down their lives for their convictions and their love for God. This statement is thematically parallel to the statement in 12:11, which states that “they have conquered him [Satan, the accuser of the brethren] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony,<sup>23</sup> for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

#### *The Literary-Historical Problem*

Why have almost all English versions of Rev 6:11 added the same interpolation into the text for no apparent grammatical reason, especially given the serious grammatical problem it introduces? There is a literary-historical explanation.

Many scholars, including Bible translators, take the position that the author of Revelation was literarily dependent on other documents purportedly in circulation at the time he was writing. They look for other writings, primarily pseudepigraphal apocalyptic, that may have been sources for the ideas John expresses in Revelation. Although the evidence is poor for John’s use of contemporary

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Col 2:10.

<sup>22</sup> For example, G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 395; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 160; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 289. Beale observes that the nominative plurals of *hoi syndouloi* and *hoi adelphoi* “must most likely be taken as if they were genitive,” recognizing the grammatical discrepancy, but unwilling to dispense with the interpolation (*The Book of Revelation*, 395). Even a scholar of the caliber of Henry Barclay Swete states that “they are kept waiting . . . till the number of their fellow-slaves is fully made up.” He gives no indication of the grammatical problem, observing that the plural verb “implies a scarcely tolerable ellipse of” either *dromos* (course [of life]) or *arithmos* (number), both singular nouns (*Commentary on Revelation: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*, Kregel Reprint Library [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1977], 91–92). See also Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation: A Commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 89; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, IVP New Testament Commentary 20 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 108.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rev 6:9: “Those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness [testimony] they had borne.”

nonbiblical literary sources, there are a few rare similarities that can be found in pseudepigraphal apocalyptic. J. Scott Duvall, along with most commentators, accepts the interpolation with no notation regarding any grammatical problem. He says, “The idea of God setting a predetermined number of martyrs appears in Jewish tradition.”<sup>24</sup> For example, in 1 En. 47:1–4, we find this passage:

In those days, the prayers of the righteous ascended into heaven, and the blood of the righteous from the earth before the Lord of the Spirits. . . . And with one voice, they shall supplicate and pray—glorifying, praising, and blessing the name of the Lord of the Spirits—on behalf of the righteous ones which has been shed. . . . The hearts of the holy ones are full of joy, because the number of the righteous has been offered, the prayers of the righteous ones have been heard, and the blood of the righteous has been admitted before the Lord of the Spirits.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, 4 Ezra (2 Esd) 4:35–37 says,

Did not the souls of the righteous in their chambers ask about these matters, saying, “How long are we to remain here? And when will come the harvest of our reward?” And Jeremiel the archangel answered them and said, “When the number of those like yourselves is completed; for he has weighed the age in the balance, and measured the times by measure, and numbered the times by number; and he will not move or arouse them until that measure is fulfilled.”<sup>26</sup>

Finally, we find this statement in 2 Bar. 23:4–5: “For when Adam sinned and death was decreed against those who were to be born, the multitude

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<sup>24</sup> J. Scott Duvall, *Revelation*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 108. Osborne also states, “This is a concept strange to most today, but it was a common emphasis in apocalyptic writings to say that God in his sovereignty had established a certain number of martyrs who were yet to be killed before the final judgment” (*Revelation*, 289). Richard Bauckham presents an extended study on these purported extrabiblical sources (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* [London: T&T Clark, 1998], 48–56).

<sup>25</sup> Trans. E. Isaac, *OTP* 1:35. Isaac first dates this section of 1 Enoch, called “The Book of the Similitudes,” to “c. 105–64 B.C.” (*OTP* 1:7). However, he cites J. T. Milik as arguing, based largely on the fact that no fragment of the Similitudes has been recovered at Qumran while the four other sections of 1 Enoch were discovered there, that the Similitudes is a late Christian work. Isaac does not agree. “In conclusion,” he writes, “I am convinced that 1 Enoch already contained the Similitudes by the end of the first century A.D.” (*OTP* 1:7). If the Similitudes existed by the end of the first century AD, it could have been contemporary with Revelation. John did not necessarily know of the Similitudes or borrow an idea from them, even if they were written first. John claims to be recording only what he has seen and heard in vision and has been instructed to write (Rev 1:19; 22:8, 18).

<sup>26</sup> Trans. B. M. Metzger, *OTP* 1:531. Metzger dates the composition of 4 Ezra to “about A.D. 100,” though he adds that it “cannot be placed much after A.D. 120” (*OTP* 1:520). These dates are after the writing of the book of Revelation, so it should not be assumed that 4 Ezra influenced John.

of those who would be born was numbered. And for that number a place was prepared where the living ones might live and where the dead might be preserved. No creature will live again unless the number that has been appointed is completed.”<sup>27</sup>

These passages reveal the traditional literary ideas that many scholars believe underlie the textual ideas found in Revelation. However, it is not difficult to observe the differences between these passages and the one in Rev 6:11. Grant Osborne points out that “there are slight differences with regard to who constitutes that number”: martyrs in Revelation and 1 Enoch, the righteous dead in 4 Ezra, and all those born into the world in 2 Baruch.<sup>28</sup> The context of the significance of the number is also different. In 1 Enoch, instead of a plaintive appeal to God for justice, we find a spirit of joy, of glorification, of praise, and of blessing to the Lord of Spirits. In 4 Ezra, the righteous want to know how long they must remain in their chambers, but the answer by Jeremiel the archangel is that the times must be numbered, not the fellow servants and brethren of the plaintiffs. In 2 Baruch, it is the number of all who had been born since Adam’s sin who must be accommodated in the grave until the resurrection. Clearly, there is little real correspondence between the material in Rev 6:11 and these various incidences of there being a number that must be completed. The passage in 1 Enoch is the only one that might have been able to influence John’s thinking, but though it may have convinced many scholars that John meant to express a similar idea regarding number here, the grammatical evidence is still formidable, and the interpolation undermines John’s claims that he saw and heard in vision the things which he was instructed to write down (Rev 1:19; 22:8, 18). Clearly, John was not dependent on these sources,<sup>29</sup> and there is little evidence to support the interpolation.

Some speculate that John was referring to the number 144,000, which is found in Rev 7:4–8 and 14:1–5 and is frequently seen as a group of last-day believers redeemed from the earth.<sup>30</sup> They believe that the 144,000 are

<sup>27</sup> Trans. A. F. J. Klijn, *OTP* 1:629. Klijn states that “2 Baruch is probably later than 4 Ezra, since it appears to show an advanced stage of theological development.” “Therefore,” he concludes, “the Apocalypse of Baruch seems to come from the first or second decade of the second century” (*OTP* 1:617). If this is the case, then it would not have been possible for this idea to have influenced John’s writing. Besides, the topic is a different one, and it is difficult to see how the one could have influenced the other.

<sup>28</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 289. Of course, there is no number mentioned in Rev 6:11 though Osborne ignores that fact.

<sup>29</sup> The problems of dating and dependency are discussed in the footnotes 24–26.

<sup>30</sup> Alberto R. Treiyer speaks of “the number of those who would also suffer in the short and final trouble of the last generation” (*Seals and Trumpets: Biblical and Histori-*



the ones who, according to 6:11, will be made perfect and sealed for eternal life. While it is true that 14:5 presents them as blameless (*amōmoi*, without blemish), the number is symbolic, not literal,<sup>31</sup> and they are not viewed as martyrs in Revelation. Adding the interpolation in 6:11 does not resolve the problem or point to the 144,000.

Another view is that “the completion of the number of the martyrs mentioned in verse 11 was to await yet another era foretold in Revelation 13.” There “an apostate church” was to conduct a war against the true faith.<sup>32</sup> This view is still based on the notion of completing a number rather than completing the process of character perfection by being faithful even unto death (Rev 2:10; 12:11; cf. 1 Pet 4:1).

From a historical perspective, it is interesting to observe that the idea of a number in Rev 6:11 does not appear at all in the Early Church Fathers.<sup>33</sup> The earliest mention of it is not found until the Latin Fathers in the early sixth century, when Fulgentius of Ruspe (c. 467–532) declared that the time of God’s vengeance or retribution “is put off by the divine patience so that the number of the saints can be filled up.”<sup>34</sup> Later in the sixth century, Primasius (fl. 550–560) said that the holy martyrs preferred to “wait for the completion

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*cal Studies* [self-pub., Adventist Distinctive Messages, 2005], 174). He later identifies these as the 144,000 (*Seals and Trumpets*, 186). See also Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 126; Neall, “Sealed Saints,” 249.

<sup>31</sup> This is a topic for another paper, but I will address it briefly. John hears the number 12,000 from each of twelve tribes of Israel (7:4–8)—and this list of tribes does not match any list in the Old Testament (cf. Gen 48–49; Num 1–2; Deut 33:6–25; 1 Chr 2:1–2; Ezek 48:1–8)—but when he looks, he sees “a great multitude that no one could number, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9). See Hans K. LaRondelle, *How to Understand the End-Time Prophecies of the Bible: The Biblical-Contextual Approach* (Sarasota, FL: First Impressions, 1997), 147–150. Cf. Rom 2:28–29; 9:6–8, 27; Gal 3:7–9, 26–29.

<sup>32</sup> Oral Edmond Collins, *The Final Prophecy of Jesus: An Introduction, Analysis, and Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 147.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen S. Smalley suggests that the idea is found in Polycarp’s prayer at his martyrdom, giving thanks for being counted worthy to “have a part in the number of Thy martyrs” (Mart. Pol. 14). However, Polycarp makes no reference to Rev 6:11, nor is there any hint of an allusion to that passage. It seems to be merely a general reference to the group of martyrs, including Christ, who would have a part in “the resurrection of eternal life” (*The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005], 165).

<sup>34</sup> Fulgentius of Ruspe, *On the Forgiveness of Sins* 2.5.2–3, quoted in William C. Weinrich, ed., *Revelation*, ACCS New Testament 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 96.

of the number of other brothers.”<sup>35</sup> Bede the Venerable (c. 672/673–735), in the early eighth century, taught that the martyrs would receive a second white robe “when the number of their brothers has been filled at the end.”<sup>36</sup> These interpretations were not due to the reading of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate since there is no mention of a number in the Vulgate’s rendition of the text. Somehow the notion crept in at some point in the interpretation of the text but at a relatively late date.

It seems that there is no literary-historical support for introducing the designated interpolation into the text of Rev 6:11.

### *The Theological Problem*

There is a significant theological difference between the fellow workers and brethren (or fellow believers) being the subjects of the plural verb *plērōthōsin* (they should be completed or made perfect) and the singular noun *arithmos* (number) being the implied subject of the verb. We have seen that adding the interpolation “the number of” into Rev 6:11 is grammatically incompatible with the both the plural subject of the verb and the nominative case of the subjects of the verb, which are turned, by the interpolation, into the objects of the supplied genitive “of.” The absence of *hō arithmos* and the genitive in the Greek text is not a grammatical problem. Its presence creates a grammatical problem. But it also creates a theological problem.

What is God asking the martyrs to wait for? Is he waiting for a particular number of people to be killed as they had been, or is he waiting for something more significant? As noted above, some have suggested that God has a particular number in mind that he is waiting for, and when that number has been made up or completed, he will bring the judgment the martyrs are asking for and put an end to the killing. As mentioned earlier, some hold that the number is given in the next chapter—144,000.<sup>37</sup> But that number represents those who will be sealed for salvation, not those who will be killed, and the evidence suggests that it is a symbolic number, as many scholars agree,<sup>38</sup> not a real number of martyrs God is waiting for. Others have suggested that God is waiting in order

<sup>35</sup> Primasius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 6.11, quoted in Weinrich, *Revelation*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels* 2.12, quoted in Weinrich, *Revelation*, 96.

<sup>37</sup> Neall says, “The number 144,000 should thus be understood as a symbol of the unity, perfection, and completion of God’s church—complete because the number has been made up (6:11)” (“Sealed Saints,” 262).

<sup>38</sup> E.g., Collins, *Final Prophecy of Jesus*, 165–167; Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 71–72; Duvall, *Revelation*, 114–115; Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 130–131; George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 117; Mangina, *Revelation*, 111; Michaels, *Revelation*, 112–113; Osborne, *Revelation*, 315; Paulien, *The Gospel from Patmos*, 149; Neall, “Sealed Saints,” 262–263; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 186–188.

to replace the number of angels he lost with the rebellion of Lucifer in heaven.<sup>39</sup> But this cannot be derived from the text, which does not speak of a number but speaks about the quality, not the quantity, of those who would be martyred in the waiting period before judgment takes place. Any attempt to focus on the quantity of the martyrs, no matter the number, misses the theological point.

Some have focused on *when* the number will be completed, based on the question, “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (6:10). J. Ramsey Michaels says that “their number will be complete when the sixth seal is opened.”<sup>40</sup> He offers no explanation for this conclusion, nor does the text, unless one takes the great earthquake in verse 12 as the judgment promised, which makes little sense. The answer to the prayers of the martyrs is explicitly answered in 19:2: “For his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (Rev 19:2 ESV), a reference to the judgment on Babylon under the seventh bowl plague (16:19; 17:1, 6; 18:6, 8, 24). Philip Edgcumbe Hughes seems uncertain when this will happen: “The determination as to when their number is complete is in his [God’s] hands.”<sup>41</sup> Others consider it to be fulfilled at the end of the age, when Christ brings an end to persecution and martyrdom.<sup>42</sup> But despite the question asked by the martyrs in verse 10 (“How long?”), the timing of the completion is not the main point of God’s answer to their question.

God sidesteps giving a direct answer to their question. Instead, he changes the issue from when judgment will take place to what needs to take place before they can receive the justice they desire. They are given white robes, indicating their vindication, but they must wait patiently for the rest of their petition. The main point of the passage is God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises, an issue of theodicy. It is central to the plot of the book of Revelation.

In the statement of his covenant with his people in Deut 32, God calls his people to look to him for their protection and salvation. They will face many obstacles, trials, enemies, and challenges, but he is their Rock and their salvation. “All his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,

<sup>39</sup> I have found no published source for this, but have discussed this idea with a number of individuals over the years.

<sup>40</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, 108.

<sup>41</sup> Hughes, *Book of the Revelation*, 89–90. Cf. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 126.

<sup>42</sup> Duvall first states, “The idea of God setting a predetermined number of martyrs appears in Jewish tradition.... In this way, God assures the martyrs that judgment and vindication are certain, but only in his sovereign timing” (*Revelation*, 108). Subsequently, Duvall adds, “But delayed judgment should not be taken to mean no judgment. One day God will judge wickedness and vindicate his people. Jesus closes his Olivet discourse with several parables that warn of God’s coming judgment on unbelievers at the end of the age (Matt. 24:43–25:46)” (*Revelation*, 109; cf. 110).

just and upright is he” (v. 4). Israel has not been faithful in return (vv. 15–18), but God, though hurt, jealous, and angered by their unfaithfulness, feels pity on them for their lack of discretion (vv. 19–30), and he needs to maintain his faithfulness before their adversaries for the sake of his own reputation (v. 27). God describes Israel’s enemies, saying, “Their rock is not as our Rock; our enemies are by themselves” (v. 31). Their vine is like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, and their wine is deadly, like the venom of poisonous serpents (vv. 32–33). “Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly. For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free” (vv. 35–36).

“For I lift up my hand to heaven and swear, As I live forever, if I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and will repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh—with the blood of the slain and the captives, from the long-haired heads of the enemy.” Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people’s land. (vv. 40–43)

This is the premise upon which the cry of the martyrs is based. They have been waiting patiently for him to act, but they want to know how much longer they have to wait for the promised judgment and vengeance on their adversaries. Jesus himself raised the issue in his parable of the unjust judge. He asked the disciples to listen to what the unjust judge said about delivering justice because of the widow’s continual requests (Luke 18:6). Then he added, “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily” (vv. 7–8). So when the martyrs cry to God, “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” they are claiming the language of God’s covenant promises to them.<sup>43</sup>

In giving them the white robes, he is offering them the tokens of their vindication and de facto guarantees of their eternal inheritance. Yet he tells them that they must rest a little longer, for the end is not yet. There are others who must go through a similar experience, to prepare them for receiving the white robes of the overcomer also (Rev 3:5). They must endure the fiery trial in the furnace of affliction that will perfect character and fit them for the new heavens

<sup>43</sup> Joel Nobel Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 17 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 277–280. Michaels notes that the martyrs’ prayer “is not a cry for personal vengeance, but an appeal to a ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true,’ to bring justice in the world by destroying the powers of evil. It is an eschatological prayer” similar to other biblical prayers (*Revelation*, 108).

and new earth in which righteousness dwells (Jas 1:2–4; 1 Pet 1:6–7; 4:12–13; 2 Pet 3:11–13). This is not about waiting for a number to be complete but for a people to be made complete, ready for eternity with God. They must learn to trust so fully in Jesus and his righteousness for their salvation and they must hate sin so perfectly that they are ready to lay down their lives, if necessary, to attain the goal of salvation (Ps 145:17; Isa 5:16; Luke 1:74–75; Rom 6:19–22; Eph 4:24; Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 1:13–19; Rev 12:11; 22:11).

### *Conclusion*

I have noted a problem in the text of Rev 6:11 that presents the reader with some difficulties. The interpolation “the number of” does not appear in the Greek text; neither does it meet the grammatical demands of the text. The verb is plural and requires a plural subject, found in the compound nominative subjects *syndouloi* (fellow servants) and *adelphoi* (brothers or fellow believers). Further, the preposition “of” would require its object(s) to be in the genitive case rather than the nominative case, producing *kai tōv syndoulōv autōn kai tōn adelphōn autōn tōn mellontōn apoktennesthai*, which would function as the objects of the preposition following the purportedly implied “the number of.” Grammatically, there is no evidence that the interpolation is implied or even admissible.

Reviewing the literary-historical case for the interpretation, I have found no substantial basis of support, either in the purported pseudepigraphal parallels put forward as backgrounds for John’s thinking in Rev 6:11 or in early Christian quotations of and commentaries on the text. John himself claims to have recorded what he saw and heard in visions and auditions given him by Christ himself or his angel. The purported sources are too different from John’s text and context, as well as from each other, to qualify as his sources, and most are dated too late to influence John’s text. Similarities are not evidence of borrowing. And all supposed evidence for the interpolation is very late, beginning in the Latin fathers of the sixth century AD and beyond. Even the Latin Vulgate does not contain the interpolation.

Theologically, the interpolation misconstrues the purpose of the passage, turning a qualitative completion or perfection of the character of faithful believers into a quantitative completion of a certain disputed number of martyrs. The question asked by the martyrs in Rev 6:10, “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” is a common biblical theme, which is never fully answered in Scripture until Rev 19:2. The purpose in 6:11 is not to answer the martyrs’ question, but to provide an assurance that God will be faithful to his covenant promises, as found in Deut 32. He will avenge their blood, but he will do so at the right time, and they must rest patiently upon his promises. He gives them white robes to assure them of their vindication as overcomers in the judgment and as the recipients of all of his promises. But he also informs them that there

are others who must go through the testing experiences that they have gone through in order to prepare them also for perfection of character and reception of the white robes of Christ's righteousness, which is their right of access to eternal salvation (Isa 61:8–11).