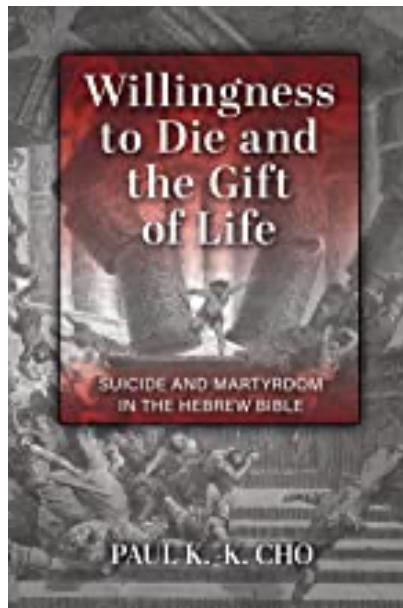


RBL 04/2023



**Paul K.-K. Cho**

***Willingness to Die and the Gift of Life: Suicide and Martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible***

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. Pp. xvi + 301. Paper.  
\$26.99. ISBN 9780802875419.

Klaas Spronk

Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam

In this well-written and clearly structured monograph, Paul K.-K. Cho (Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible at Wesley Theological Seminary), claims that the roots of martyrdom can be found in the Hebrew Bible. This is done from a positive (one could also say from a Christian and, therefore, biased) perspective seeing martyrdom as a way to give life by choosing death. Cho makes his case by describing a development from taking one's own life to avoid shame (as with King Saul) to eventually the well-considered choice for martyrdom (as with the Wise in Dan 11). In between, he pays ample attention to the more or less related stories of Job, Samson, Judah, Esther, and the Suffering Servant of the Lord in the book of Isaiah.

In the first chapter, Cho discusses "potential cases of suicide in the Deuteronomistic History": Abimelech (Judg 9), Saul (1 Sam 31; 2 Sam 1), Saul's armor-bearer (1 Sam 31), Ahithophel (2 Sam 17), and Zimri (1 Kgs 16). In advance, he remarks that "the Deuteronomistic treatment of suicide should not be taken as representative of the entire Hebrew Bible or biblical Israel on the matter" (4). This could be said about every text about a chosen death in the following chapters, but Cho does not return to this problem. It is also remarkable that, prior to the discussion of the Deuteronomistic texts, Cho states that "fortunately, the Hebrew Bible contains profound thinking about death and life, specifically dealing with the question of when dying might become preferable to living, in the magnificent and enigmatic book of Job" (4). This illustrates his own opinion about this subject and his contention that there is a positive development in the Hebrew Bible, which at

the same time, raises (again) the question about possible bias in the presentation of the material. Already starting this presentation with the stories of the death of Abimelech and Saul points in this direction. The death of Abimelech is, in fact, not a suicide, and also the suicide of Saul is more an act of despair and attempt to avoid humiliation. In both cases one cannot speak of willingness in the sense of making a deliberate choice. The emphasis is, as is rightly remarked by Cho, not the question of whether or not suicide was allowed but whether their death was a consequence of their deeds and a punishment by God. According to Cho, the account of Saul's death in 1 Chronicles differs in this respect from that in 1 Sam 31, but the difference is not so big that one can conclude on the basis of these texts that suicide is "a controversial topic" (13). More relevant here is that the conclusion in 1 Chr 10:13–14 has a clear parallel in Judg 9:56–57 about the death of Abimelech as divine punishment. Suicide is not the issue here.

Much attention is given to the story of Ahithophel in 2 Sam 17. This concerns not only his suicide but also his relation to the other royal counselor, Husai, resulting in the conclusion that Ahithophel was rightly called a wise man whose wisdom could even be compared to the oracles of God. This underscores that his death can be regarded as honorable. The death of King Zimri can best be compared to the death of Saul. More than judging his suicide, the biblical account points to a form of divine retribution.

Cho concludes the first chapter with the remark that the given discussion "will elicit a range of strong responses" because of the different views on suicide, but this can hardly be based on stories presented in this chapter. The remark fits better as the introduction to the following chapter about Job as "a more existential meditation on death" (27). Here Cho convincingly describes how Job's longing for death as an escape from his suffering in the beginning of the book (3:2–7) evolves in a willingness to die in defense of his integrity, forcing God to respond (27:2–7). Cho can build his argument on previously published articles on the relation between the opening and concluding chapters of the book of Job and on his study on "evolutionary psychology and suicide in the book of Job" (*Biblical Interpretation*, 2019). An interesting idea is that Job compares himself to Adam according to 31:33 ("If I have concealed my transgressions like Adam"), claiming that "he does not hide because of sin, but rather that he has no sin to hide" (57). Cho even rather boldly states that at the end of the book Job would have been presented as "a new Adam ... who rejects the counsel of despair and chooses to rise and live day after day" (59). According to Cho, this is one lesson the book teaches: the high value of life and "that beauty that deeply delights the soul is possible, even given great sorrow and suffering" (59). This presupposes that the book of Job is best interpreted when taken as one coherent unity.

Chapter 3, on Samson, offers much more than reflecting on the question in the title: "Was Samson a Suicide Terrorist?" It elaborately discusses questions such as the identity of the father of Samson and the source of Samson's strength. An important place is taken by reflections on the picture of Samson in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, partly repeating an article published in the volume *Studies*

*in the History of Exegesis* (Tübingen, 2022; mentioned in the note on 60, but not in the bibliography). All of this is very interesting but hardly relevant for the line of argument with regard to the theme of the book. Milton may be in the eyes of Cho a “supreme reader of the Bible” (98), but one may question whether he should be followed in associating Delilah to Jael and in line with this seeing Samson as “the Philistine’s Sisera” (98).

In chapter 4 Cho describes the biblical rewriting of the Samson story on the basis of a diachronic analysis of the text in the Hebrew Bible and of the history of interpretation. He suggests that the stories of Judg 14–15 should be read as stories at home in Israel’s tribal period. Chapter 13, about Samson’s birth, would have been prepended in the monarchic period and chapter 16 appended during the Babylonian exile. This then functions as the key for the interpretation and evaluation of the theological message. Judges 14–15 can be read as the story about “a hero of the weak” (104), reflecting the situation of Israel as dominated by the Philistines. In the seventh century BCE the “Deuteronomistic Historian” would have added Judg 13 and placed the story within the wider framework of the national historiography, relating Samson to Samuel and David as their negative counterpart, thus transforming him “from a hero into an antihero” (105). Finally, Judg 16 would have been part of an exilic “update to the Deuteronomistic History” relating the account of Samson to the last king of Judah, Zedekiah: both are blinded, bound in bronze fetters, and brought into enemy territory. Once again, Samson functions as the weapon of the weak. The final act of killing so many Philistines after being blinded and bound would also have given hope that something similar could happen to the Babylonians after what happened to Zedekiah. All this leads to the conclusion that we can distinguish different “layers of signification” in the story of Samson’s suicide attack. This certainly makes sense, but the question remains to what extent this analysis and evaluation is influenced by modern views on religion and violence. It can be welcomed, therefore, that Cho adds an overview of the history of interpretation, with special attention to the work of Augustine, about Samson as a prefiguring Christ. He could build on the work of David Gunn, *Judges through the Centuries* (2005). He could have profited also from the extensive surveys in Cees Houtman’s *Ein Held des Glaubens? Rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studien zu den Simson-Erzählungen* (2004), but with the exception of Jan Dietrich’s *Der Tod von eigener Hand* (2017) most non-English secondary literature is ignored.

In the discussion in chapter 5, about Judah’s willingness to die for the sake of his brother Benjamin, Cho comes to a conclusion that comes close to Augustine’s view on Samson, when he states, “The connection between legitimate leadership and a willingness to suffer for the group finds perfect biblical expression when the Johannine Jesus ... declares, ‘I am the good shepherd ... who lays down his life for the sheep’” (153).

Chapter 6 discusses the topic of voluntary death in regard to Moses in Exod 32–34. There can be little doubt about Moses’s willingness to die, but one can question whether this should be described as “choos[ing] the possibility of postmortem punishment” (164) and whether it is imaginable that

God's self-definition as "merciful and gracious" would imply that God himself eventually is willing to die. This provocative idea is taken up in the epilogue.

Before that, in chapter 7, Cho discusses the clear example of Esther's willingness to die (see especially Esth 4:16), partly repeating his article "A House of Her Own: The Tactical Deployment of Strategy in Esther" (*JBL*, 2021). Again, this publication is mentioned in a footnote (172) but is not in the bibliography.

In chapter 8 Cho recapitulates the previous discussions about the stories of voluntary death by asking the question whether they can be seen as early examples or forerunners of the explicit cases of martyrdom as he finds them in the Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah and the Wise in the book of Daniel. For this, they should comply with the criteria that (1) it reflects a situation of persecution; (2) the choice is necessary; (3) the person involved is willing; (4) there is some kind of benefit; and (5) the martyr expected a reward beyond death. According to Cho, none of the persons discussed thus far fully meets these criteria to be called a martyr, but their stories did pave the way to full-blown martyrdom. This is described in chapter 9, in which he argues with understandable reserve that the Suffering Servant of Isa 53 can be identified with both the prophet himself and with the servant he describes in the servant of YHWH songs. The Suffering Servant would have died a martyr's death and have been rewarded with a status "more godlike than humanlike" (249). Interpreted in this way, Isa 53 can be presented as closely related to what was later more explicitly expressed about the death and resurrection of the Wise in Dan 7–12 (briefly discussed in ch. 10).

In the epilogue, Cho again gives (as in ch. 8), a summary proving his point that one can see in the Hebrew Bible a development from stories about suicide to the idea of martyrdom. After that, he returns to the remarkable question posed at the end of chapter 6, about whether God would be willing to die and, if so, "Can God die according to the Hebrew Bible?" (266). He could be compared then to the Canaanite god Baal, who according to the Ugaritic myth died and came back to life again. It would include YHWH among the "gods, children of the Most High" who according to Ps 8 "shall die like mortals." Cho does not give a definitive answer to his question; he leaves it open.

The book is concluded by a bibliography, an index of names and subjects (which appears to be far from complete, missing many references to Brettler and Dietrich, for example), and an index of scripture and other ancient texts.

This book offers more than the title suggests, for instance, elaborate exegetical discussions of the stories of Samson and Judah. The claim about the roots of the idea of martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible is well-substantiated, be it that it is not without bias. One may note the influence of Christian ideas about martyrdom, when Cho paves a straight way from the Old to the New Testament. It is

hard to escape the idea that the question about God's willingness to die could only come up in an author who had Jesus on his mind.