A. Overview

God’s forgiveness is an issue because what God will do is never certain. God does not have to forgive, and he does not always forgive. The alternatives — end of the relationships with God / restoration of the relationship — show that the forgiveness question carried high stakes for Israel. The Israelites were searching and insecure about why God forgives.

Walter Eichrodt offers us some very abstract and Christian tinged reasons why God forgives. My effort is going to be in the direction of a more empirical and exegetical approach. On surveying the 200 or so forgiveness passages in the Old Testament I found more than 20 different reasons given why God forgives. Why were so many different reasons given? In part, the plenitude of reasons is a function of parallelism and stress. At least 10 different reasons are given in Psalm 103. Sometimes the writers pile up reasons, more to persuade than explain. Or, a passage gives only one reason why God forgives. Sometimes no reason is given. The evidence suggests that there was no one normative understanding of forgiveness in the Hebrew Scripture. Different situations evoked different rationales for favorable action. Some grouping of forgiveness passages by rationale patterns is possible, but even when that is done there are over 125 passages which show no obvious dependence upon any other passage. Each of those passages is a unique creation in its imagery and emphasis as though the forgiveness concern arose case by case with close attention to the specific situation. To a large extent each expression of forgiveness is an ad hoc creation. Forgiveness in the Old Testament is never centered around one specific event and then cosmologized . . . . like a one-time, saving act of atonement. Old Testament statements on forgiveness are much more expressions of the ongoing dialogue between God and Israel in history. It is important to remember that the tradi-
tion about forgiveness grew episodically rather than systematically. We have pre-theological evidence, but no theological statement.

After reflecting on them for some time, I began to see in the 20 different reasons why God forgives three categories by which they can be classified. What follows is a survey of those results.

Reasons given in forgiveness texts why God forgives:

A. Reasons in God

2. Because of God's womb pity, rahûm: Exod 34:6-7; Deut 13:17; Hos 1:6-7; Mic 7:19; Pss 51:3; 78:38.
3. Because of God's mercy, hannûn: Exod 34:6-7; Pss 41:4; 51:3.

These three terms come as close as anything in the Old Testament does to explaining forgiveness in terms of God's nature. Because these terms are tightly associated in Exod 34:6-7, we will give that passage special attention.

5. It is an ongoing propensity with God to be forgiving: Deut 32:43; Pss 65:3; 78:38; 86:5, 103:3, 130:4; Dan 9:9.
6. It is unmotivated; God does it because God does it: Jer 31:34; 33:6-8.

7. It is rooted in mysteriousness and holiness. In some relatively few, but important passages, forgiveness is said to come out of God's mysteriousness and holiness. It is like saying, 'Beyond covenantal, priestly, kingly, or even religious reasons, God's forgiveness transcends religion and logic.' Probing into the question of "Why does God forgive?" we come close to the essential mystery of who God is and why God functions as he does. In Mic 7:18 it says "Who is God like thee . . . ?" God forgives to evoke awe and a sense of incomparability. Ps 130:4: "There is forgiveness with thee that thou mayest be feared." "Feared" is better translated "held in awe." The act of forgiveness is surprising, never predictable. It underlines the distance between