Exegesis of Exodus 3

The following is a sample of an: Exegesis on Exodus 3 with special reference to the character of God.

Note both the format of the Exegesis and the way the exegesis concentrates on the relevance of each section to our specific question.

Comments about the literary context of the passage (i.e. the place of the passage within chapter & book).

This passage appears near the start of the second book of the bible. In the first book we heard how God's good creation was not as it should be and that God had chosen Abraham to be part of his plan to set the world right. Abraham had been blessed in order to be a blessing and had been promised many things which were not fulfilled by the end of the book. Reading the bible canonically we are left wondering if the promises will now be fulfilled.

Exodus starts off hopefully; the people have multiplied and are very much on the way to being a multitude of people – a promise which in Genesis we thought might never be fulfilled. However we quickly discover that the fulfilment of this promise destroys the other promises. Not only do they not have land or wealth but they are enslaved because of it. Our attention turns, as in Genesis to an individual Moses and we have been following his rise and fall.

The book of Exodus seems to have two purposes - to tell of the rescue of Israel from slavery and to outline the covenant that Israel enters with YHWH her God. Exodus 3 initiates both these themes. It explains that God is going to save Israel, and more particularly why he will do so. The burning bush and its location on Mountain Horeb points to the theophany and revelation of God at Mt Horeb that will be explored more fully at Exodus 20. It arises out of exactly the same motivation as the salvation of Israel, namely that Israel is God's people as a result of his covenant with the Patriarchs and therefore he wishes them to live in perfect freedom.

We have, therefore, already obtained quite a picture of God in the story that leads up to our passage and more will be revealed in what follows. As we shall see, there are however two new things about God that will be revealed in this story. Firstly we shall learn his 'name' or rather a description that masquerades as a name, a description that is perhaps more enigmatic that revelatory. Secondly we shall learn of elements of his nature that so far have not been so obvious.

Anything about who wrote this passage or how it got into this format - Source and redaction criticism

Traditionally the 5 books of the Pentateuch were ascribed to Moses, although there is little in the Pentateuch to indicate authorship. In the nineteenth century, the tools of historical criticism suggested that there might be 4 strands to the Pentateuch (EJDP). Exodus 3 is often considered to be an amalgam of the E and J strands. For instance 3:1 uses Elohim and is assigned to E while verse 2, using YHWH, is assigned to J. The majority of scholars date E and J to before the Exile, with E coming from Northern Israel and J coming a little later from the south. The two sources are primarily used to explain contradictions in the books. For instance in 3:1 Moses father-in-law is called Jethro whereas in 2:18 he is called Reuel. Jethro is believed to be the Elohist's name and Reuel the Yahwists. Similarly Mt Horeb is the name used by the Elohist for what the Yahwist will later call Mt Sinai. Some scholars attempt to separate out the 2 strands believing that E and J have slightly different messages and if we want to really understand the message of the book we must understand what E and J originally meant. Other scholars note how intertwined the two sources have become by the work of the redactor (often one verse may contain both sources) and suggest that it is the meaning of the redactor that is canonically most important for us. As regards the character of God it is often suggested that the Elohist and the Yahwist have slightly different views of God as will become apparent when we look at individual verses.

As regards the form of the book, it is often said to fall into the genre of theophany – call narratives. In these narratives there is a theophany (an awesome appearance of God accompanied by fire, wind and earthquake) and then a call and task given to an awestruck and reluctant individual. Isaiah's call is of this form, as is Elijah's (although Elijah has a particular twist to the form that can only result because we know the expected sequence.). In its own way the Mt Sinai experience on Exodus 19-20 is also a theophany-call narrative and this narrative mirrors and foreshadows that which is to

1 NB Not everyone dates J to before the Exile. Some recent scholars think J was the last of the sources, using and expanding on E. Others don't think E ever existed, so the subject is in a state of flux.
come. Durham suggests that the redacting of the two strands has been undertaken so as to heighten and repeat this basic theophany-call structure. Both elements of this genre are highly significant for our understanding of the character of God. On the one hand we have a transcendent, awesome God who does as he wills and on the other an immanent God, closely involved with human being, giving them freedom to interact and affect what God does.

Anything about this as literature, story, plot etc.

Literary critics are more interested in the final form of the story rather than its redaction. They note how the plot of the story very skilfully builds up suspense and engages us the reader in what is going on. We are surprised by a bush burning and not consumed and wonder what will happen. We are relieved when in v 7 we discover that God will do something about the slavery, knowing that it will be more effective than Moses action in chapter 2. We are surprised but understanding when Moses is reluctant to obey God, but likely to think he pushes his luck when he continues to resist right up to 4:10.

What is particularly interesting in the passage is the way the characters develop which is relevant to our question. Most of the time, we learn about our characters through what they say. This leaves us with many unanswered questions. Does Moses refuse God's command because he's modest or because he is scared? Is God angry with Moses? Or does he want Moses to question him and thus reveal more and more of his plans with each question? It is clear that we are going to learn more about God from what he says than from what the narrator tells us, but even more from reading between the lines in what is not said.

Some keywords in the passage are also noticeable. It is not surprising in a passage where God appears that the word 'God' should be frequent, even so for it to occur 21 times in 15 verses is excessive and clearly indicates that this passage is specifically about God – his nature and his actions. Therefore it is a good passage for our task.

Any comments on these particular verses that seem significant to you key words or concepts, social and historical background, areas of debate.

Verse 1 -5

It is noticeable that Moses has ranged along way from home with his father in law's flocks. This must suggest that he is trusted and has become well integrated, for flocks were the family's capital. We might wonder if he has forgotten his family and people in slavery in Egypt. If so it is clear that God has not.

There is nothing to locate the mountain geographically but it is described theologically. Early hearers would know exactly what this was, although in the story it would as yet mean nothing to Moses.

The messenger of God is an ambiguous character and there has been much written on whether this is an angel or another name for God himself. It is certainly God who speaks. Some think that the Elohist sees God as more transcendent so in the Elohist account it is an angel intermediary that appears and speaks, while the Yahwist has a more anthropomorphic God who speaks directly and that the verses therefore betray different sources and theologies of God.

Fire is a common symbol of God and God has already appeared in fire to Abraham Gen 15 and will again appear in a pillar of flame when Israel 13:21 to guard and protect Israel. Fire is a good metaphor for a powerful, uncontrollable God who can offer either comfort (warmth, protection) or harm. In the C20th some scholars tried to explain the fire naturally e.g. as a particular type of bush that naturally combusts or a volcanic action etc. The story however seems to intend a supernatural encounter.

The verb for 'come no closer' in v5 is the technical word for approaching the presence of God in worship. It is not surprising that Moses has to remove his shoes as that was a common element of worship as it still is in Islam which has retained its Middle Eastern context.

We have therefore already gained a picture of a great and awesome God, worthy of reverence, yet one who deigns to speak to mortals, even lone shepherds.

The exegesis would continue in a similar vein....

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2 Durham J I Exodus Word Books Texas 1987 p30
3 Durham 1987 30
4 Durham 1987 31