

Professor Albin van Hoonacker.

By EDGAR DE KNEVETT, BRUSSELS.

THE appearance of van Hoonacker's *Les Douze Petits Prophètes traduits et commentés* is an event which affects a far wider circle than the Roman Catholic students for whom it is primarily intended. To readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES especially Dr. van Hoonacker is no stranger.¹ His studies in the chronology of the post-exilic period alone have made him one of the few (alas, of the very few) Roman Catholics whose labours are taken into consideration by Biblical scholars all over the world.

His life has been one long devotion to study and teaching. Born at Bruges in 1857, and educated mostly there and at Louvain, he was at first drawn to scholastic philosophy and theology. When a theological student, he buried himself in the ponderous tomes of Suarez, with the result that in 1886 a treatise, *De Creatione ex Nihilo*, won him the Doctorate of Theology. Few persons would consider these labours a very promising training for Biblical criticism, but a chance circumstance suddenly threw the Louvain theologian into Biblical studies, and with so great a success did he prosecute them that, two years later, he published a short dissertation on the connexion of the first four chapters of Deuteronomy with the rest of the book. This attracted great attention: Driver, for instance, devotes to its arguments several pages of his Commentary on Deuteronomy. Thenceforth the young scholar's career was marvellously rapid. By the year 1890 he had not only been appointed Professor of Hebrew and Assyriology and of Old Testament Criticism in his Alma Mater, but he had published another small work which immediately placed him in the front rank of Biblical critics. Happening to read through the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, he acquired the conviction that Ezra's expedition (Ezr 7-10) took place after, and not, according to the usual belief, before Nehemiah's mission. Otherwise, he argued, Ezra would have

done everything in Jerusalem, and there would have been nothing left for Nehemiah to perform. Van Hoonacker imagined that he was not alone in this opinion, but what was his astonishment when he turned up the commentaries! A renewed examination only served to confirm him in his conclusions, and even a prolonged holiday judiciously advised by his superiors was unable to shake them. His little book, with the significant title, *Néhémie et Esdras: Nouvelle Hypothèse sur la Chronologie de l'Époque de la Restauration*, was the starting-point of a lengthy discussion, in which the leading critics of the day took part. The strength of his arguments may be judged from the fact that no less redoubtable a critic than Kuenen undertook to demolish them. In no way daunted, van Hoonacker replied in 1891 with his *Néhémie en l'an 20 d'Artaxerxès I Esdras en l'an 7 d'Artaxerxès II*, but his Dutch opponent died just before its publication. The controversy was continued by Kuenen's successor, Kusters, but it was greatly shorn of its interest by Kusters' granting the main point of the argument, the anteriority of Nehemiah. Perhaps those who would like a concise and accessible *exposé* of van Hoonacker's arguments may be referred to his article in the *Revue Biblique* for April 1901, in which, with relentless logic, he advances nineteen solid reasons in proof of his hypothesis. In connexion with this subject, it must have been a gratification for him to find, in the recently discovered Elephantine papyri published by Sachau, a confirmation of the date which he had assigned to the high-priesthood of Jehohanan (Ezr 10⁶, Neh 12^{22f.}).

Meanwhile the Louvain professor was maturing another idea which entirely revolutionizes the prevalent conceptions of early Israelitish religion. He reached the conviction that the sanctuaries known in the time of Samuel as Nob and Gibeon (= Gibeah = Geba) were in reality identical with the sanctuary of the ark at Kiriath-jearim. Consequently, he argued, there was in Israel, at this period, a single legitimate sanctuary only, that of the ark, where regular sacrifices were offered. This he independently confirmed by showing, in his

¹ He has published the following articles in THE EXPOSITORY TIMES:—'The Return of the Jews under Cyrus' (May 1897); 'Divination by the 'Ob amongst the Ancient Hebrews' (January 1898); 'Ezekiel's Priests and Levites' (August 1901); 'The Four Empires of the Book of Daniel' (June 1902).

Lieu du Culte, that such was in fact the intention of the legal enactments on sacrifices throughout all the codes of the Pentateuch. Among van Hoonacker's students at Louvain, there was at this time a Dutchman, H. A. Poels, who took up his professor's ideas with great enthusiasm. Poels made several further identifications of these early sanctuaries, and finally published in 1897 his *Examen Critique de l'Histoire du Sanctuaire de l'Arche*. The combined results of these two works is that, broadly speaking, the unity of sanctuary, so far from dating merely from the reforms of Josiah, is not only taken for granted throughout the entire legislation of the Israelites, but can be proved to be a matter of actual fact all through their historical development. We have here an early instance of a critic who, whilst he assumes the main results of modern literary criticism, yet extracts from the Biblical documents an historical conception of Israelitish history which, if not identical in all points with the traditional view, comes infinitely nearer to it than the current ideas of the Grafian school. Who will deny that several critics at home and abroad (e.g. G. A. Fries, on this very question of the centralization of worship) are independently being drawn in the same direction? And is it not possible that a much larger historical element may one day be allowed in the first eight books of the Bible than is generally the case at present?

In 1899 appeared the well-known *Sacerdoce Lévitique*, and in the following year Dr. van Hoonacker became one of the original twelve consultants of the Biblical Commission. He is apparently the only Roman Catholic priest whose Biblical

works (except the *Petits Prophètes*, which belongs to a special series) have been dispensed by the ecclesiastical authorities from the necessity of bearing the *imprimatur*. Considering the sorry state of Biblical studies in Belgium and the isolation to which a worker is there necessarily confined, it is evident that a Belgian student must work under somewhat discouraging conditions. All the more honour to Louvain University for having produced such a man as van Hoonacker. He is never happier than when grappling with a complicated problem, and he requires for its solution but the minimum of help. His everyday tools are of the simplest kind: no Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* for him, no *Oxford Hebrew Lexicon* constantly at his elbow. Leave him alone with the plain Massoretic Text, his Latin Gesenius of 1833, and his Flemish pipe, and he will ferret out a Greek word lurking in the text of Daniel, or evolve a new theory on the relation of the Elihu speeches to the rest of the Book of Job. His labours are seldom addressed to others than specialists, and, even on the rare occasions when he has a wider public in view, he is no popularizer of current ideas. By no stretch of imagination can his productions be deemed sensational, and yet their originality of view is so remarkable that they may well be called startling. A commentary from his pen on the Books of Samuel, if he could but be induced to take it up, would be sure to provide ample food for reflexion. It is a pleasure to add that the solidity of his learning is excelled only perhaps by his modesty and by his readiness to help others in search of advice or direction.

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF DEUTERONOMY.

DEUTERONOMY XXXIII. 25.

'Thy bars shall be iron and brass;
And as thy days, so shall thy strength be.'

EXPOSITION.

'Thy bars.'—The allusion may be to Asher's position: situated in the far north of Canaan, in the neighbourhood of foreigners, it would need to be well defended against encroachment and invasion. *בָּרֵךְ* (*bolt*), from *בָּרַךְ*, to bolt a

door (Jg 3^{23, 24}); no doubt the same as *בָּרֵךְ* (Ca 5⁵), which Neh 3^{3, 6} shows to be distinct from *בָּרֵךְ*, *bar* (3³).—DRIVER.

THE rendering 'shoes' is from a supposed derivation of the word from *בִּעַל*, 'a shoe.'—ALEXANDER.

'Shall be iron and brass.'—The territory of Asher probably contained iron and copper. Cf. 8⁹.—COOK.

'And as thy days, so shall thy strength be.'—May Asher's strength to resist its enemies never decline.—ROBINSON.

THE tribe is pictured as an individual; and if that be the true rendering, it will be a wish that Asher's strength may be