

Brenk, Alexandria

FIECAbstPR08RTF

Frederick E. Brenk, S.J.
Pontifical Biblical Institute
Via della Pilotta 25
I-00187 Rome
Italy
Tel.(0039)
Inst.: 06-69526.1
Rm. 06-69526.6119
Fax 06-69526.6151
E-mail: frederick.brenk@biblico.it

Preferred Panel: no. 16, Religion in Society
Title of Paper: Religion and Society. The Isis and Osiris Religion as a Forerunner of
Christianity
Length: 20 minutes
Outline of the content (abstract below).

Religion and Society.
The Isis and Osiris Religion as a Forerunner of Christianity

Long before Christianity appeared on the scene, the Graeco-Roman cult of Isis and Osiris made important contributions in transmitting a foreign religion to the Graeco-Roman world. When Christianity appeared later, contemporary with the height of the cult's popularity, Greeks and Romans had already been accustomed to something similar. Both religions had to walk a tightrope. Graeco-Romans looked for a very ancient religion with foreign roots, but also desired something familiar to their society and not too exotic. The Isis cult had to be really Egyptian, but not too much so. Christians, at least after the first generation, in contrast, considered Christianity to be the fulfillment of Judaism, but not Jewish. The solution for the Isis cult involved the adaptation of Graeco-Roman art and architectural styles, allegorical interpretation, and the imposition of Graeco-Roman expectations in religious language, prayer, and ritual. It developed a distinctive architectural and iconographic style which was primarily Graeco-Roman as is evident from temples at Pompeii and elsewhere. Later, as in the Isaeum Campense in Rome, some references to Egypt, such as the animals, could become more daring. The cult had a deep attachment to Egypt, and not only Alexandria but also Upper Egypt. For this purpose it employed painting alluding to Egypt, sought out real Egyptian artifacts, employed Egyptianizing prayer rituals, used an Egyptian clergy, and esteemed texts in hieroglyphics, even if the Egyptian priests alone could read them. Interest in death and the afterlife, and belief in some sort of resurrection, though, took on Graeco-Roman characteristics, while the Egyptian myths could be mollified through Platonic allegoresis. There are great differences, however, and many complexities and contradictions in how the Isis cult and later, Christianity made the necessary, and successful accommodations.