

Biblical scholars reject filmmakers' claim about tomb of Jesus

JERUSALEM (CNS) — Catholic biblical scholars and an Israeli archaeologist rejected filmmakers' claim that a tomb uncovered nearly 30 years ago in Jerusalem is the burial site of Jesus and his family.

Dominican Father

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, a biblical archaeologist and expert in the New Testament at the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem who was interviewed for the film two years ago, said he did not believe there was any truth to the claim.

"It is a commercial ploy that all the media is playing into," he told Catholic News Service Feb. 27.

Amos Kloner, an Israeli archaeologist who wrote the original excavation report on the site for the predecessor of the Israel Antiquities Authority, called the claim "nonsense."

"In their movie they are billing it as 'never before reported information,' but it is not new. I published all the details in the *Antiqot* journal in 1996, and I didn't say it was the tomb of Jesus' family," said Kloner, a professor of archaeology at Israel's Bar-Ilan University.

"I think it is very unserious work. I do scholarly work ... based on studies," he said.

Toronto filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici and Oscar-winning Canadian director James Cameron announced at a press conference in New York City Feb. 26 that by using new technology and DNA studies they have determined that among the 10 ossuaries — burial boxes used in biblical times to house the bones of the dead — found in the cave by Kloner in 1980 are those of Jesus, his brothers, Mary, another Mary whom they believe is Mary Magdalene, and "Judah, son of Jesus."

The documentary film by Jacobovici and Cameron is to be aired on the Discovery Channel March 4 and in Canada March 6 on Vision TV. A book on the topic, written by Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino and published by Harper Collins, is to go on sale Feb. 27.

Father Murphy-O'Connor said the names found on the ossuaries "are a combination of very common names."

"Fifty percent of all Jewish women in the first century were called either Mary or Salome. It doesn't mean much at all," he said. "You can prove anything with statistics."

The DNA tests could "only prove that they are human" but "certainly did not prove" any familial connection, he said.

Father Murphy-O'Connor noted that Kloner had written about the findings a decade ago, and though it was all out in the public domain nobody had been interested.

According to press reports, the filmmakers said they had worked on the project with world-renowned scientists, including DNA specialists, archaeologists and statisticians. They said the ossuaries were not identified as belonging to Jesus' family when they were first discovered because the archaeologists at the time did not have the knowledge and scientific tools that now exist.

But Kloner noted that Jesus' family was from Galilee and had no ties to Jerusalem, casting serious doubt that they would have had a burial cave in Jerusalem. He added that the names on the ossuaries were common during that time and their discovery in the same cave is purely coincidental.

He said the tomb belonged to a middle- or upper-middle-class Jewish family during the first century and the cave was in use for 70-100 years by the family.

Other books, films and articles about the tomb, including a full-page feature in London's *The Sunday Times*, a British Broadcasting Corp. documentary film and a book called "*The Jesus Dynasty*" by James D. Tabor, have been published and produced on the topic in the years since the tomb's discovery.

At the New York press conference, Jacobovici said he thought the so-called "James ossuary," purported by its owner, Oded Golan, to have belonged to James, the brother of Jesus, was also from the tomb, and he cited a forensic technique used to determine this.



Entrance to the tomb where the burial box was found nearly 30 years ago. CNS photo



A Discovery Channel documentary suggests that several ancient burial boxes excavated 27 years ago in Jerusalem contained the remains of Jesus and his family. Kloner, who oversaw work at the tomb, has refuted the claims. CNS photo

scholar and head of Toronto's Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation, said this latest film shows that "self-proclaimed experts" have learned nothing from the James ossuary incident.

"One would think that we learned some powerful lessons from the media hype surrounding the James ossuary several years ago, and how important public institutions like the ROM (Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto) were duped in their hosting such fraudulent works," he said.

Father Rosica said: "Why did the so-called archaeologists of this latest scoop wait 27 years before doing anything about the discovery? James Cameron is far better off making movies about the Titanic rather than dabbling in areas of religious history of which he knows nothing."

However, Tabor, who is also chairman of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, said he thinks the tomb might be connected to Jesus "despite all the hype and heat and at the risk of being derided by some. In my view we should give the evidence a fair hearing."

Tabor was a consultant to the film, but said he has no legal or financial connection to it.

"What has surprised me the past two days is the willingness of many in our fields (archaeology, biblical studies, history) to comment to the press in a negative and dismissive way before viewing the film or reading the book," he said in an e-mail Feb. 28.

A spokeswoman for the Israel Antiquities Authority said two of the ossuaries had been loaned to the filmmakers for their press conference as is customary for such requests for exhibiting antiquities as long as certain conditions are met. The loan was made in the name of freedom of expression and creativity, she said, and did not mean the authority supported their claims.

She said one of the Mary ossuaries has been on display for many years at Jerusalem's Israel Museum; the Judah ossuary is on display in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; two ossuaries are currently with the filmmakers; and the other six are in the authority's warehouse just outside Jerusalem.

He did not mention that in 2003 the Israel Antiquities Authority declared the inscription on the James ossuary a forgery or that Golan is currently on trial for forging part of the inscription.

Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, a biblical

Archaeologist calls claim about Jesus' tomb 'nonsense'

JERUSALEM (CNS) — The claim by filmmakers that a tomb uncovered nearly 30 years ago in Jerusalem is the burial site of Jesus and his family is "all nonsense," said an Israeli archaeologist.

"In their movie they are billing it as 'never before reported information,' but it is not new. I published all the details in the *Antiqot* journal in 1996, and I didn't say it was the tomb of Jesus' family," said Amos Kloner, who wrote the original excavation report for the predecessor of the Israel Antiquities Authority and is now a professor of archaeology at Israel's Bar-Ilan University.

"I think it is very unserious work. I do scholarly work ... based on other studies," he said. "It is all nonsense."

Filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici and Oscar-winning director James Cameron announced at a press conference in New York City Feb. 26 that by using new technology and DNA studies they have determined that among the 10 ossuaries — burial boxes used in biblical times to house the bones of the dead — found in the cave by Kloner in 1980 are those of Jesus, his brothers, Mary, another Mary whom they believe is Mary Magdalene, and "Judah, son of Jesus."

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Amos Kloner

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