

When I heard that there was a new film out on Sudan, *The Four Feathers*, being set as it was in the dramatic time of the British Expeditionary Force of 1884 to 1885 when General Charles Gordon was being besieged in Khartoum, I was most eager to see it.

I've travelled and ministered throughout Sudan, and have intensively researched the history of Sudan, writing extensively on it. There most certainly is a great need for films to be made of this dramatic and vital period of history. A tremendous amount of heroism was displayed by British forces in the Sudan as the film so effectively shows.

However, despite many positive features of this spectacular redemptive film, I was most disappointed at *The Four Feathers*. The film had much promise, it presented a powerful, personal drama and romance story, but it was fatally flawed by missing the main point of the military expedition. The central focus of the film is that there was no reason for the British forces to go to what the lead character, Harry, calls "a God-forsaken desert," except for "her majesty the Queen" and for the glory and honour of the Empire.

That is just not true. Far from being "God-forsaken", Sudan has the oldest community of Christians in Africa, dating all the way back to AD37 and Acts chapter 8. For a thousand years, Christianity was the majority religion of Northern Sudan. For nine centuries these Christians of the Kingdoms of Nubia, Alwa, and Dotawa, resisted the Southward expansion of Islam, defeating the Muslim armies and sending them retreating back to Egypt. There are numerous Scriptures (Isaiah 18, Psalm 68:31, Zephaniah 3:10, etc.) which confirm that God has a plan for Sudan. It is most certainly not "God-forsaken"!

General Charles Gordon, the Governor-General of Sudan, was a dedicated evangelical Christian who had gone to Sudan to eradicate the slave trade. After succeeding in setting many slaves free and eradicating the slave trade, he was faced with a great rebellion by Muslim slave traders, led by the Mahdi.

The Four Feathers suggests that the British forces went to Sudan for "the Empire." However, Sudan never was part of the British Empire. Sudan later became a British protectorate. The primary reason for British involvement in the Sudan was to eradicate the slave trade there. The capital city, Khartoum, was built upon the twin evils of the slavery and ivory trade. By the time General Gordon went to Sudan, seven out of every eight Black people in Sudan were slaves. The Nile River was being used as a highway of slavery. Villages throughout Equatoria were being pillaged by slave raiders and since William Wilberforce had ldd the British Parliament to outlawing the slave trade, the British government had dedicated their Navy and military to the eradicating of the slave trade worldwide.

The British Military expedition to the Sudan in 1884 was to relieve General Charles Gordon, who was trapped in Khartoum on a mission to end the slave trade in Sudan. However, The Four Feathers makes no mention of the Islamic slave trade or of the primary British objective of the establishment of justice and freedom for the Sudanese.

The film does portray the tremendous public enthusiasm and support for the relief column, but does not explain that this came from the overwhelming evangelical support for the anti-slavery work of General Charles Gordon.

Another fatal flaw of The Four Feathers is how they depicted the British victory at Abu Klea as a British defeat. The Battle of Abu Klea, on 17 January 1885, was an overwhelming victory for the British. A small British relief column, made up largely of the Camel Corp, smashed the Mahdi's force of 10 000 Dervishes.

There was also no garrison of British forces wiped out. The only two British soldiers in Sudan were General Charles Gordon and his adjutant, Colonel Stewart. They were commanding Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers.

Nor was the Officer Commanding the British Camel Corp killed in action at Abu Klea. Nor did the British forces flee. If they did, they would have been completely annihilated. Vastly outnumbered, far behind enemy lines, facing a numerically overwhelming enemy, sounding the retreat was not an option, nor was it considered.

In fact, no British regiment was ever wiped out in Sudan. (Could the film makers have confused

Abu Klea with the Battle of Isandlwana in South Africa (1879) where the Zulus wiped out a British regiment who stood firm and fought to the last man? Zulu Dawn depicts this battle). Nor is there any record of the Mahdi's dervishes putting on British uniforms, either at the Battle of Abu Klea or anywhere else, nor would it have deceived the Camel Corp at Abu Klea, as they knew that they were the only British forces in the entire region.

It was also most strange that The Four Feathers would depict the Black Sudanese hero, Abou, who assisted Harry as a Muslim! If he was a Muslim, why did he oppose the Mahdi? It is outrageous that The Four Feathers found it impossible to portray the dynamic Christian faith of the Black Christians in Sudan, and chose rather to restrict religious devotion only to the Muslims. The Evangelical fervour of the British soldiers of that time is also ignored.

The Four Feathers effectively portrays the severe dangers in Sudan at that time, and the courage and dedication of many of the British forces there. However, it is not credible to me that Harry could pass off as an Arab, especially in appearance and language. It is also highly unlikely that a mere Lieutenant would be sent back to Britain for a public relations meeting during the expedition. Nor that he would leave the sniper's rifle on the ground in the market place and simply walk away. Also, the British army separated the camel forces from the cavalry on horseback and from the infantry. They also wore different uniforms. Yet, the central characters seemed to vary from riding camels to riding on horseback to commanding infantry. This would not be possible. There was also absolutely no warning before the assault on the British forces at Abu Klea, it was a complete surprise attack. Yet it was completely repelled by the vigilant British forces. (The Battle of Abu Klea was more accurately portrayed in Charlton Heston's film Khartoum).

The Four Feathers had much promise, but it is fatally flawed by missing the main point of the British expedition and by portraying a major British victory as a total defeat. The film is wrong, not in peripheral areas, but in the central focus and facts.

When I was doing the research for my book Faith Under Fire in Sudan, which also focuses on General Charles Gordon, his eradication of the slave trade and war with the Mahdi, I was most impressed by the dynamic Christian faith of so many Black Christians in Sudan. I think it is most sad that this Hollywood production ignores the courage and resilience of these Black Christians, and chooses instead to portray one of their victims as a Muslim himself. This is a distortion of both the history and the present reality of Sudan - where Christians continue to fight, an island of Christianity is a sea of Islam, fighting for survival and for their faith.

Faith Under Fire in Sudan is available from [Christian Liberty Books](#) (240 pages with 140 photographs and 7 maps)

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