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Grade level: 5

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Allow students, in groups or individually, to examine the text at the above link answering the questions below in order. The questions are designed to guide students into a deeper analysis of the source and sharpen associated cognitive skills.

Level I: Description

1. What information is the Fee autobiography trying to convey?
2. In what state does the author live and own other property?
3. What religious denomination did John Fee belong?
4. What decision did Fee's wife support? And what was her advice?

Level II: Interpretation

1. Why did Fee morally want to buy and free one of his father's slaves?
2. Why did Fee feel financially obligated to free one of his father's slaves?
3. Why did Fee's mother want to keep Julett, the slave woman?
4. Why did Fee's father change his mind about selling Julett?

Level III: Analysis

1. What does this conflict between family members tell you about the issue of slavery?



2. Might there have been another option for Fee to take to settle his dilemma?

3. Do you believe that Fee's father had the legal right to resell Julett? Morally?

John Fee

John Fee was a Methodist minister from Kentucky. His father was a prosperous slave-holding farmer. In Fee's diary, he chronicles the conflicts he had with his father over slavery. This entry describes how he tried to free a slave named Julett to save her from being sold and separated from her family:

Intelligence came to me that my brother had advised my father to sell the woman referred to, for the reason that there were more women in the family than were needed.

I said to my wife: "I cannot redeem all slaves, nor even all in my father's family, but the labors of Julett and her husband contributed in part to the purchase of the land I yet own in Indiana, and to sell those lands and redeem her will be in some measure returning to her and her husband what they have toiled for." My wife said: "Do what you think is right." I took my horse, rode twenty-five miles to my father's house and spent the night. In the morning of the next day I sought an opportunity when my father was alone, and having learned that he would sell, asked what he would take for Julett. He fixed his price. I said: "Will you sell her to me if I bring to you the money?" He said yes. I immediately rode to Germantown and borrowed the requisite amount of money by mortgaging my remaining tract of land for the payment. Whilst there I executed a bill of sale, so that without delay my father could sign it, before he even returned from the field at noon. I tendered to him the money and the bill of sale. He signed the bill of sale, and took the money. I immediately went to "Add," the husband of Julett, and told him I had bought Julett and should immediately secure by law her freedom. I said to him: "I would gladly redeem you but I have not the means." He replied: "I am glad you can free her; I can take care of myself better than she can." I went to the house, wrote a perpetual pass for the woman, gave it to her, and said, "You are a free woman; be in bondage to no man." Tears of gratitude ran down her sable cheeks. I then told her that at the first county court day I would take her to the clerk's office, where her height could be taken and she be otherwise described, and a record of her freedom made. This was just before the amendment to the State Constitution that forbade emancipation in the State. At noon my father came in and told my mother of the transaction. My mother was displeased, -- did not want to spare the woman from certain work for which she was fitted. My father came to me and requested that I cancel the contract and give up the bill of sale. I said to him, "Here is my horse, and I have a house and lot in Lewis County; I will give them to you if you so desire; but to sell a human being I may not." He became very angry and went to the freed woman and said to her, "When you leave this house never put your foot on my farm again, for I do not intend to have a free nigger on my farm." The woman, the wife and mother, came to me and said, "Master says if I leave here I shall never come back again; I cannot leave my children; I would rather go back into slavery." I said, I have done what I regarded as my duty. To now put you back into slavery, I cannot. We must simply abide the consequences. The woman was in deep distress and helpless as a child. Although I had my horse and was ready to ride, I felt I could not leave the helpless one until a way of relief should open. After a time Julett came to me and said, "As long as mistress shall live I can stand it; I would rather stay." I said, "You are a free woman and must make your own decision. If my father will furnish to you a home, and clothe and feed you, and you shall choose as a free woman to stay, all well; but to sell you back into slavery, I cannot." To this proposition to furnish a home to the freed woman my father agreed. There was now a home for the freed woman, and this with her husband and children and grand-children.

That day of agony was over and eventide had come. I spent the night. The next morning just as I was about starting back to my home, my father said to me, "Julett is here on my premises, and I will sell her before sundown if I can." I turned to him and said, "Father, I am now that woman's only guardian. Her husband cannot protect her, -- I only can. I must do as I would be done by; and though it is hard for me to now say to you what I intended to say, yet if you sell that woman, I will prosecute you for so doing, as sure as you are a man." I saw the peril of the defenseless woman. I would gladly have cast from me the cup of a further contest, but I saw that to leave her, though now a free woman, was not the end of obligation. I felt forcibly the applicability of the words, "Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord negligently, and cursed be he that keepeth back the sword from blood." Jer. 48:10. I mounted my horse and rode twelve miles where I could get legal counsel, -- counsel on which I could rely. I found that if I left the woman on my father's premises without any public record of her having been sold, the fact of her being then on his premises would be regarded as "prima facie" evidence that she was his property and that he could sell her. I also found that in as much as he had sold her to me, I could, by law, compel him to do that which was just and right, -- make a record of the fact of sale. I rode back twelve miles, told my father what was his legal obligation, and asked him to conform to it. He said he would not. I then said to him, "It will be a hard trial for me to arraign my father in a civil court, for neglect of justice to a helpless woman, and also for a plain violation of law; but I will do so, as sure as you are a man, if you do not make the required record of sale." After hesitancy and delay he made the record. These were hours of distress to me, to my father, to my mother, and to the ransomed woman; but the only way to ultimate peace, was to hold on rigidly to the right; though in so doing I had, in the Gospel sense, to leave father, mother, brother, sisters, houses, lands, -- all, for Christ's sake. I was conscious that no other motive impelled me.

From the Autobiography of John Fee

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