It's happened to you before. You're reading the scriptures and think, "hey, I read something about this that was cool/insightful/important! But I can't really remember what it said or where I found it." Or, you made some teaching notes on a lesson, and now suddenly you're teaching it again and really wish you could remember that perfect quote from President Hinckley and the relevant cross-reference in… Job? Or maybe Galatians? Fifth Nephi?

The solution to this problem is a *system* of note taking, which may be the single best long-term tool in your scripture study. Indeed, note-taking may be far more important and productive than scripture-marking. Elder Richard G. Scott said that "Knowledge carefully recorded is knowledge available in time of need. Spiritually sensitive information should be kept in a sacred place that communicates to the Lord how you treasure it. This practice enhances the likelihood of your receiving further light."[1]

Why take notes on the scriptures?

1. **To build.** If you don't write anything down, whatever epiphanies, "aha! moments," spiritual morsels, revelatory insights, or things you learned are *gone* the next time you come to that passage. If you don't write it down, it practically never happened. If you write down your thoughts and other things, you're not starting from zero again the next time. This way, your study is cumulative and builds on itself.

2. **To remind and remember.** Spiritual experiences and thoughts seem much more resistant to memory than more tangible experiences or knowledge. If they're connected with your scripture study, write them down to be reminded of them. I also have in my notes historical experiences connected with passages, like "I visited Nazareth on 3-15-99." I sometimes date my notes, and as time passes that lets me see my own progression (or retrogression) in various ways. I've sometimes gone back and written responses to myself a few years later.

3. **To interact and enhance.** Taking notes requires more thinking and interaction with the scriptures. That increased interaction uses different parts of the brain, involving us more and cementing those scriptures, thoughts and experiences deeper. This results in richer, more effective and more rewarding scripture study.

Your notes can be paper, electronic, or a combination. Paper notes have the advantage of being physical, but this means they can also be lost and they don't appear automatically with your scriptures. Your scripture margins are likely far too small for lengthy notes created over multiple readings. As a missionary before the internet, I wrote in my scripture margins, and also kept a small paper notebook for when I couldn't write in my margins (like when I didn't have my quad on the bus.) I later copied all those paper notes to my electronic notes. Depending on your circumstances and preferences, you

[1] "Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge," *Ensign* (November 1993), 86.

may find it useful to carry a paper notebook for notes, but be sure to transfer those notes later or they're effectively lost.

Electronic notes (or e-notes) have several advantages over paper. First, e-notes give your scriptures unlimited margins. Want to write 1000 pages on John 1:1 and carry it on your phone? No problem. Second, e-notes sync among multiple devices (ipad, home computer, phone, etc.), making them easier to find, easier to carry along with you, harder to lose, and easily shareable. When you look up a verse, they show up automatically with that verse.[2] For electronic notes, most readers will find the LDS Library app sufficient, particularly as missionaries. However, there are other systems, both stand-alone note-programs like Evernote or OneNote (where you would need to create your own organizational structure), and dedicated high-end scripture programs like Bibleworks, Logos, or Accordance, which have capabilities far beyond the LDS Library App.

So, now you have your desk, paper and electronic scriptures, a clean slate… and there they sit, stubbornly remaining… blank. Many people don't know what to write in their notes, which often means that they haven't crossed the line from scripture *reading* into scripture *study*. (The problem with scripture *study* is you can barely get through a single verse without running down all kinds of interesting rabbit trails, questions, and thoughts. I have participated in some group study that literally spends several hours on a single verse, and it is amazing.)

What kinds of things might go into notes?

1) **Questions** This is one of the master categories, and very fruitful. Questions focus your thinking and can be of many different kinds. For example, basic journalistic who-what-when-where-why-how questions can be very useful in getting your facts straight, identifying things you're unsure of, and noting things to look up in reference works like dictionaries[3] or specialized encyclopedias.[4] Other questions might focus on the meaning or significance of something. "Which Herod is this?" "Where was Jericho and what's the significance of mentioning it here?" "How does this verse logically follow from the previous verse?" "We already KNOW Laman and Lemuel are older, why is Nephi telling us again?"[5] "What's a 'lawyer' in New Testament times?" "What does 'conversation' mean in the KJV?" "What's the connection between X in this verse and Y in the previous verse?" "What does 'pure'

[2] Be aware that your LDS Library App scripture notes are language-specific. As of mid-2017, at least, a note made on John 1:1 in your *English* scriptures will not appear when you look up John 1:1 in your *Spanish* scriptures.

[3] Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* is extremely useful (but not definitive) for the definitions roughly from the time of Joseph Smith, the D&C, and the translation of the Book of Mormon.

[4] E.g. *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Eerdmans, 2010), or the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Brill, 1995.)

[5] What is the purpose of Nephi's repetition of "my elder brothers" in 1 Nephi?

mean in 'pure love of Christ'?"

My scriptures are filled with questions I don't yet have complete answers to, and I think that's the way it should be, i.e. having a knowledge of the truth but always continuing to seek and learn (to invert 2 Timothy 3:7).

2) **Answers** Sometimes when I return to a verse, I have a new perspective on an old question, or new data (see below), so I write it in. I tend to date my notes, so I can see that I had a particular question on May 4, 2006, and found an answer in December of 2008, with a further correction and thought in July of 2009. This lets me see progression, a kind of conversation with myself.

3) **References** I often come across useful bits that pertain to a particular passage when reading books, magazines, newspapers, or blogs, and also when actively searching out answers to questions. I'll go to the passage and write in the reference and maybe a 1-line summary. If it's an electronic source, I can even add a link. For example, I recently added a link in my John 21:5 notes to a post by Bill Mounce, a well-known grammarian of New Testament Greek. At Alma 30 in my notes, I have a link to "Countering Korihor's Philosophy" *Ensign*, July 1992, which introduced me to important ideas like "epistemology." I also write in other kinds of references, like my own cross-references and relevant scriptures.

4) **Text from those References** Often, I don't just want a title or a link, but some actual text or quote from the reference. Sometimes I copy in a line or two, other times a whole paragraph or more. Since my notes are electronic, there's no space limitation, and I can copy in lengthy passages. I don't do that often, because notes that are too long make it difficult to find specific things in them.

In the case of reference materials, sometimes I do copy in everything relevant. My Book of Mormon notes have lots of lexical[6] entries, where I've copied information on a particular word from Webster's 1828 Dictionary, how that word is used elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, historical usage from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and even lexical information about what Greek and Hebrew words are translated that way in the KJV. I'll copy in information from commentaries, *Ensign* articles, and anything else relevant that I want to have instantly at hand in that verse. I'll also write in the history of relevant textual changes,[7] notes about different translations (and the reasons for the differences), or the JST/1830 Book of Mormon/ Hebrew/Greek/Aramaic meaning, textual variants, etc. Sometimes I copy in information, commentary, or understandings I disagree with as well as my argumentative counter-notes.

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[6] That is, having to do with words and meaning.

[7] E.g., in 1 Nephi 20:1, I note that Joseph Smith added the phrase "or out of the waters of baptism" to the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon.

In my Book of Mormon notes, I have marked the original "chapter" divisions of the 1830 edition, which are much larger than the current divisions made by Orson Pratt for the 1889 edition. For example, Jacob 4 and 5 were one large chapter in the 1830 edition, but today we've divorced Jacob 5 from the reason for that sermon, found at the end of Jacob 4.

5) **Spiritual Impressions** Note taking is not just for useful facts and interpretations, but also for spiritual progression. Remembering or forgetting one's deliverance, whether spiritual or physical, contributes to spiritual progression in the Book of Mormon (e.g. Alma 29:11-12, or Alma 60:20); remembrance of past spiritual experiences is life, forgetfulness likely means regression and a return to past mistakes.[8] If you don't write it down, odds are you'll forget at some point.

6) **Significant Dates** This might be dates of some event described in the text (e.g. "Assyrian conquest around 722 BC"), a date relevant to the writing of a revelation in D&C, or more personal dates ("I visited Hebron on March 3, 1999.")

7) **Things to Research Later** When come across something of interest in the scriptures but don't have access to my reference works, I'll often make a note of what I want to look up and where, or footnotes I want to follow up on. I even have some shorthand, such as *CG* and *CH* for "check Greek" and "check Hebrew." On my missionar, I started using a circle with a vertical slash through it as shorthand for D&C, to save margin space. (If you do make some shorthand for yourself, be sure to create a note where you list all of them, lest you forget.) "What did 'goodly' mean in Webster's 1828?" "Is 'milk' cow milk and 'honey' bee honey?" (Answer: in the Bible, milk and honey usually aren't what we think of. Milk was predominantly from goats or perhaps camels, not cows. Bees weren't domesticated in Israel, so what is called honey is most often *devash* or dates boiled down to a sweet thick syrup. Honey from bees is sometimes termed "wild honey," because that's the only way they got it.)

8) **Summary Material: Paraphrases, Outlines, Headings** Each of these is different from those above in the sense that it summarizes or rewrites something you've read.
   a) **Paraphrases** Just as reading in a foreign language forces you to slow down and pay careful attention to each word and phrase, writing your own paraphrase of each verse makes you analyze each word and the logical flow and progression of thought. If you work on each verse separately, and then read several of them together, does it make sense? Does it flow well? If not, you haven't understood the individual verses well.
   b) **Outlines** At BYU, I required my Book of Mormon students to outline 2 Nephi. Whether you outline a chapter or a book, doing so can help you see how each piece is supposed to fit together. (See Outline section.)
   c) **Headings** At a slow job in graduate school, I printed off the Book of Mormon chapter headings and spent some time learning them. This greatly increased my

[8] E.g. Louis Midgely, "O Man, Remember, and Perish Not" in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*.

knowledge and understanding of the book's structure and narrative, as well as cementing the exact location of this story or that discourse in my memory. Even more useful is writing your own chapter heading and putting them into your notes. Since, according to the Apostolic author of our current chapter headings (see section On Aids and Help), chapter headings are not perfect nor meant to establish doctrine and undoubtedly have mistakes, feel free to write your own.[9]

Suggested Reading:

1. Eric Huntsman (BYU New Testament professor), "Teaching Through Exegesis: Helping Students Ask Questions of the Text," in *Religious Educator* 6:1 (2005). Available online.
2. John Welch (BYU law professor and scripture scholar) has some useful thoughts on questions and notes in "Towards Becoming a Gospel Scholar" in *This People Magazine*, Summer 1998, 42-56. Available online
3. James Faulconer (BYU Philosophy professor and scripture scholar) also addresses question-asking and outlining in *Scripture Study: Tools and Suggestions*. Available online. He has written an entire series on the scriptures with a compilation of good thought questions, *The Old Testament Made Harder*, *The New Testament Made Harder*, *The Doctrine and Covenants Made Harder*, and *The Book of Mormon Made Harder*
4. Julie Smith has an entire book devoted to finer detail thought-questions for the Gospels. *Search, Ponder, and Pray: A Guide to the Gospels*

[9] I requote this here, although in the book I will simply direct readers to the appropriate section. Regarding "the Joseph Smith Translation items, the chapter headings, Topical Guide, Bible Dictionary, footnotes, the Gazeteer, and the maps… [Elder McConkie says that] None of these are perfect; they do not of themselves determine doctrine; there have been and undoubtedly now are mistakes in them. Cross-references, for instance, do not establish and never were intended to prove that parallel passages so much as pertain to the same subject. They are aids and helps only."-*Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, 289-290.