

Symbols play significant roles in many Bible's books and passages. Take a symbol to mean a person, thing, or event the text invokes, that the author intends to represent something not directly revealed in that text. For instance, a mountaintop can represent a place of access to or presence before God. Eight different Psalms and multiple passages in Isaiah and other prophetic books refer to God's holy mountain or the mountain of the Lord. Moses met God on Mount Sinai, God dwelled in Jerusalem's temple built on a mount, and God transfigured Jesus on a mountain. Thus, when foreign nations and rebellious Israelites worship idols on high places, meaning mountaintops, the symbolism may especially be to reject God to his face. Many passages supply the symbol, and then supply its explanation, while other passages leave the reader to infer.

Not every mountain in the Bible, though, is a symbol. A key to grasping more of what the Bible's authors intended is to distinguish symbols from mere imagery. Mountains are always an image, as would be a river or a tree. But only sometimes are mountains, rivers, and trees symbols, such as mountains for God's holy place, rivers for baptismal passage, and trees for connection to the source of life. Recognizing symbols is primarily intuitive, coming to some from years of reading literature, especially reading the Bible. One method, though, for recognizing whether an image is a symbol is to remove the image to see if the passage retains its full meaning, that meaning which the broader context suggests. If so, then you've only removed an image. If not, then the image has symbolism that contributes to or illustrates the passage's meaning. Ask whether the image is essential, and thus a symbol, or non-essential, and thus merely an image.