

*This is a cross-posting (with permission) from [John Gee's blog](#).*

Five times in the book of Isaiah, Isaiah uses the refrain:

For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4)

This phrase was recently cited to me as an instance of God's mercy. I can see how and why someone might take it that way, but doing so fails to understand the English, the underlying Hebrew, the scriptural context and the cultural context of the scriptural passages. There is actually a dissertation being written on this subject (see [here](#)), but I will give my own take.

Let's start with the scriptural context. The refrain occurs in Isaiah after passages wherein Isaiah discusses the various punishments that will befall the wicked. This includes having their carcasses strew the streets (Isaiah 5:25), the Syrians and the Philistines devouring Israel (Isaiah 9:12), having no mercy on the fatherless and widows (Isaiah 9:17), burning up the people and subjecting them to cannibalism (Isaiah 9:18-21), subjecting the people to captivity, slavery and death (Isaiah 10:4). So, whatever stretching out the hand is, it occurs in the context of punishing the wicked.

The English sentence is constructed to say that in spite of the punishments afflicted ("for all this") "his anger is *not* turned away" so that the punishments do not satisfy the Lord's anger. To the contrary ("but") the hand of the Lord is still stretched out. So a stretched forth hand, by any careful reading of the English, is a hand administering punishment.

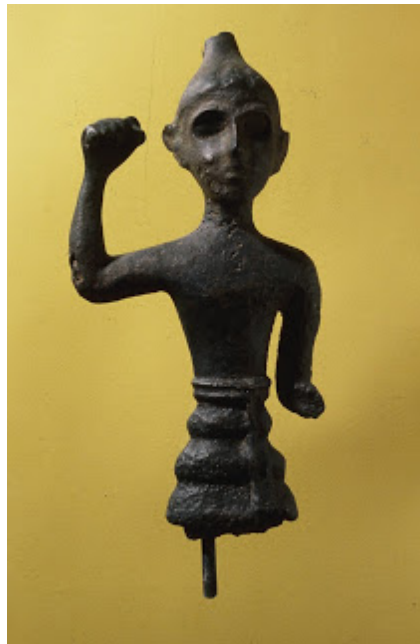
The Hebrew is also clear on the subject. The idiom is *yado netuyah* [again, I do not have time for the diacritics] which means that the hand is *hanging over, threatening, or bent*. It is thus a threatening gesture.

Looking at the cultural context, Canaanite deities are often depicted as having their arms bent, hanging over, threatening, or stretched out. There is a good example in a stele from Ugarit, now in the Louvre (and for a better photograph, see [the Louvre site](#)):

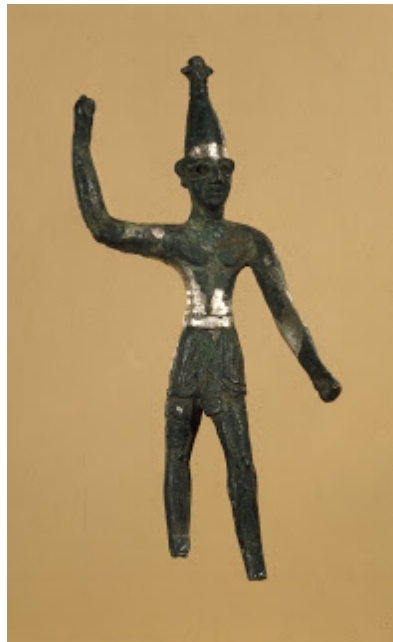


Canaanite deity, possibly Baal (Louvre AO 15775)

This stele shows the god holding a weapon over his head ready to strike. His hand is *netuyah*, stretched out, bent, hanging over, and threatening. The upraised arm is the one that is *netuyah*. The same pose is known from statues from the same area.



Unidentified Canaanite deity (BM 134627)



A Canaanite deity, possibly Reshef (BM 25096)

This is the imagery that Isaiah is using and familiar to his audience, since there are many other examples of this sort of iconography in statues and steles of gods from Canaan. The iconographic motif comes from Egypt where it means the same thing.



Smiting scene at Medinet Habu

This is not a god in a merciful attitude.

What causes God to act this way? Isaiah enumerates these reasons in his discussion: calling evil good and good evil (Isaiah 5:20), being wise in their own eyes (Isaiah 5:21), taking away justice from the righteous (Isaiah 5:23), despising the law and word of God (Isaiah 5:24), not seeking the Lord (Isaiah 9:13), the leaders of the people causing them to err (Isaiah 9:16), decreeing unrighteous decrees, and depriving people of rights (Isaiah 10:1-2). Those guilty of such things should expect the wrath of the Lord to descend upon them.

So can God extend his hand in mercy? Absolutely! This metaphor in Isaiah, however, is not an example of that. God can also smite you, which is what this metaphor is about.