The ‘Enûma Elish’ – The Babylonian Creation Myth

The Babylonian creation myth is told in the “Epic of Creation” known as the Enûma Elish. This ancient story dates back to around 1300 BCE (Before the Common Era). It has been recorded on stone tablets in an ancient script called ‘cuneiform’.

In this creation myth, the god Marduk is created in order to defend the other gods from an attack, plotted by the ocean goddess who is called Tiamat. Tiamat and the monsters of the ocean opposed the rule of the gods.

Marduk offers to save the gods if they make him their leader – and the gods agree. Marduk challenges Tiamat to combat, and destroys her by striking her head. He then rips her corpse into two halves, each of which he shapes in to the earth and sky. Marduk creates days, weeks and months; he organises the planets, stars, moon, sun, and weather. Out of Tiamat’s spittle he creates rain. The gods give their support to Marduk and he agrees to remain as their leader. He then creates the city of Babylon for himself.

Marduk says to the gods:

“I will take blood and fashion bone.
I will establish a savage;
‘Man’ shall be his name,
Truly savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods,
That they might be at ease!”

Marduk decides that he wants to create humans, for which he needs blood and bone. So Ea, Marduk’s father, kills Tiamat’s husband Kingu for encouraging her to rebel—and out of Kingu’s body ‘they fashioned humankind’. Finally, the gods build a house in Babylon in honour of Marduk. He holds a feast for them, whilst they all praise him for slaying Tiamat.

Interpreting the myth......

‘A myth is a vehicle for truth’. The Babylonians used their creation myth to represent the values and truths of their society. It could contain several different interpretations.

For the Babylonians, this myth contained key ideas about their society. Try and decode it, and think about what the following may have symbolised:

- Marduk
- the gods
- the humans

Why do you think they might have acted out this story at their spring festival?
The story of Creation in Genesis chapter 1 is part of the first book of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. The Old Testament corresponds to the Jewish holy book, the Tanakh (or 'Hebrew Scriptures') and so it is important for both Christians and Jews.

For centuries, Christians and Jews believe that Genesis I was written by Moses and that it should be taken as a historical account of how the universe, and humankind, were actually made. Today, some religious people still believe this. However since the Enlightenment period and especially Darwin's discoveries, many Christians have rejected this literal understanding of Genesis—they refer to St Augustine's claim, back in the 4th century, that Scripture should not always be interpreted literally.

Such Christians and Jews say that Genesis is the Word of God and contains eternal truths about the nature of human existence, our relationship with God, each other, and the universe in which we live. They also believe that it tells us about the values and religious beliefs of the ancient people who told and preserved this story and then wrote it down -

### The Creation Account in Genesis I

In the beginning when God created* the heavens and the earth, 
2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face** of the waters. 3 Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. 
4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.' 7 So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. 11 Then God said, 'Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.' And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,' 15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. 16 God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. 17 God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

* or ‘formed’  ** or ‘the spirit of God hovered...’
20 And God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.’ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.’ And it was so. 25God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth.’

27So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ 29God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. 31God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

[Genesis 2] Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

1. Christians and Jews believe this account contains eternal truths. Underline/highlight where the text reveals key ideas about:

(a) The nature of God
(b) The nature of human beings
(c) The relationship between humans and the earth

2. Explain, in your own words, what you think these key ideas might be.

3. Re-read Genesis 1:27. Explain what you think is meant by the word ‘image’?

4. Some Christians and Jews say that we can find out about God by ‘looking’ inside ourselves. What do you think this means?