Temple, the Bible notes that Daniel (6th century B.C.E.), while in exile in Babylonia, faced in the direction of Jerusalem while praying (Daniel 6:11). After the final destruction of the second Jewish Temple (70 C.E.), located on the same site as the first, this tradition remained and was soon codified into Jewish law. For the most part, however, it appears that in actual practice Jews have had a rather flexible attitude toward the direction of Jerusalem and moreover, even in theory, have never been extraordinarily precise about determining its direction.

The earliest rabbis, whose views were first recorded around the year 200 C.E., believed that Jews should physically face Jerusalem when praying, but added that someone on a boat could simply direct his "heart" to the site of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem (Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 28b). Another source from the same time period elaborated, "Those in the north face the south, those in the south face the north, those in the east face the west and those in the west face the east so that all Israel [i.e., the Jewish people] prays toward one place" (Tosefta Brachot 3:16). By the late 5th century, subsequent rabbis had reiterated this viewpoint but added the opinion that a blind man or someone who does not know the direction should simply direct his "heart" towards his Father in heaven (Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 30a). Archaeological evidence confirms that 2nd- to 5th-century synagogues were roughly oriented to face Jerusalem (Avi-Yonah 1971).

As Jews migrated to North Africa and Europe, later commentators on this Jewish law—e.g., rabbis writing in 13th-century Germany (Mord’hai, Brachot 30a) and in 14th-century Spain (Tur, O.H. 94)—noted simply that Jews to the west of the Land of Israel should face eastward. Interestingly, in Arab lands—where Muslim astronomers and others focused intensely on the direction-facing problem—medieval Jewish scholars showed no interest in treating more scientifically the direction of prayer (Goldstein 1996). Perhaps the only scientific treatment of this issue was by a 15th-century Jewish astronomer in Lisbon who wrote in Hebrew of finding the direction of Jerusalem using geographic coordinates, although he did not indicate what method he used or what direction he found (Langermann 1999). By the 16th century in Poland, one legal codifier (a rabbi) wrote of facing eastward, but then added that Jews should build a synagogue such that the direction of prayer is actually southeast, since facing directly east (toward where the sun rises) is the way Christians pray (Mappah, O.H. 94:2). Subsequently, another 16th-century scholar—one who lived in Prague, Venice, and Poland—also expressed concern about directly emulating the Christian custom of facing due east, and further wrote:

For all the lands in which we dwell are all northwest of the Land of Israel, and we are not located due west of the Land of Israel. Therefore it appears to me to be the proper thing to do that, when we make a synagogue, we should be careful when we make the eastern wall—where we place the ark and we pray opposite it—that it should lean a little towards the southeast. (L’ovsh, as quoted in Mishna Brurah, O.H. 94:2)

However, a rabbi writing in 17th-century Prague noted that he had only witnessed Jews facing directly eastward. He therefore concluded—even though his own opinion was to face southeast—that most Jews must be taking the view that simply choosing one of the four compass directions mentioned 1,400 years earlier in the Talmud was sufficient (Divrei Hamudot, Brachot 30a). In fact, most synagogues from the middle ages to the 18th century placed the ark along a wall that was due east; one notable exception, though, was the 16th/17th-century "Spanish synagogue" in Venice, which was oriented to face south by southeast (Kashdan 1971). At the turn of the 20th century, yet another Jewish legal authority—one who lived in Lithuania and Poland—again reiterated that Jews in Europe should face southeast; that is, toward where the sun is 30-60 minutes after sunrise in the spring or fall (Mishna Brurah, O.H. 94:2). Despite these admonitions, however, today all, or nearly all, synagogues in Europe and North America (if they have any intentional geographic orientation at all) are oriented to face due east.

Besides praying in the direction of Jerusalem, 3rd-to 5th-century rabbis also applied the direction-facing principle to a Jewish law that one should avoid showing disrespect by relieving oneself while facing the Temple in Jerusalem when it is in view. These early rabbis debated and differed over whether this prohibition applies when the Temple is not in existence (i.e., after 70 C.E.), or when Jerusalem is not in sight, or when one is not due north or due east of Jerusalem, or when one is outside the Land of Israel entirely. Interestingly, those who followed this prohibition would avoid facing Jerusalem and avoid turning their backs to it; thus, many rabbis argued that someone to the east of Jerusalem should face north or south when relieving himself (Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 61b). Many centuries later, Jewish burial also became associated with the direction of Jerusalem. One early-19th-century European rabbi wrote that, although it is not mentioned in ancient or early Jewish texts, it had become an established Jewish custom in Europe to bury a person with the legs to the east (or sometimes south) "as symbolic of the faith in resurrection of the dead, indicating that he will stand up from his grave and leave...to travel to the Holy Land [when the Messiah comes and ends the Jewish exile]" (Responsum Hatam Sofer Y.D. part 2, section 332). This rabbi also noted that the journey from Europe to the Holy Land starts out on either a southerly route (then turns east) or an easterly route (then turns south), so either direction for burial is proper. Again, we see that Jews typically have been content, even in theory, to approach the direction of Jerusalem with approximate solutions.

Christianity

The "early Christian practice of facing the east for prayer...could well have begun in conscious contrast to the Jewish custom [of facing Jerusalem], but it would also have