

# Public and Private Space and Action in the Early Roman Period

SUSAN E. HYLEN 

*Emory University, 1531 Dickey Drive, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA.*  
Email: [susan.hylen@emory.edu](mailto:susan.hylen@emory.edu)

Scholars have often explained discrepancies in evidence for women’s participation in the early church by reference to the gendering of public and private spaces. Public spaces were coded male, and when churches moved into these spaces, women’s leadership was disavowed. This article rejects the usefulness of the public/private dichotomy as an explanatory tool, arguing that the modern sense in which these terms are used was anachronistic to the New Testament period. The overlap between public functions and space that the modern concept of the ‘public sphere’ takes for granted did not exist in the ancient world. Public functions often occurred in household spaces, and functions considered private also took place outside homes. For these reasons, scholars should look for new language that better describes the ancient patterns.

**Keywords:** New Testament, public, private, women, space, household

## Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, New Testament scholars described a sharp distinction between the public and private realms of the ancient Mediterranean world. They sought to explain evidence that seemed contradictory: in the culture at large, women were described as inferior and consigned to the household, yet at the same time they held civic offices and wielded social influence. Similarly, in early Christian communities, women were exhorted to be silent and stay at home, although many were leaders of their communities, held office and exerted considerable authority.

Against this background, interpreters found the public/private distinction a useful explanatory tool. They argued that women exerted influence in the ‘private’ realm of the household while forbidden from the ‘public’ domain of men. As Karen Jo Torjesen wrote, ‘The androcentrism of ancient Mediterranean societies had a particular configuration; it was constituted by patterns of gender beliefs which distinguished sharply between male and female honor and

between public and private space.<sup>1</sup> Because early Christian churches met in houses, these scholars argued that the churches were part of the private sphere appropriate to women. Later churches emerged into the public realm, at which point women's leadership became problematic and was curtailed.<sup>2</sup>

Assertions of a gendered divide between public and private spheres are still common among scholars today. For example, Armin Baum repeated the same sentiment: 'the ancients distinguished between a private and public sphere of life. The private sphere was located in private houses. The public sphere embraced everything outside of these houses ... Based on this distinction, the ancients were convinced that women had their place in the household, that is, the private sphere, whereas the public sphere was the men's domain.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Cynthia Westfall argued: 'Men and women were expected to belong to two different systems in the Greco-Roman world: the public sphere and the domestic sphere.'<sup>4</sup> Because 'the church met and functioned in the domestic sphere', women rightly took on roles as hosts and evangelists.<sup>5</sup>

- 1 K. J. Torjesen, 'Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History', *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (ed. E. S. Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1993) 290.
- 2 This argument began with earlier feminist scholarship, e.g.: E. A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983) 18, 20; Jouette Bassler, 'The Widows' Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Tim 5:3-16', *JBL* 103 (1984) 23-41, at 38; V. Burrus, *Chastity as Autonomy: Women in the Stories of Apocryphal Acts* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1987) 90. Later scholars include: Jerome H. Neyrey, 'What's Wrong with this Picture?: John 4, Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space', *BTB* 24 (1994): 77-91 (79-80); Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 206; David M. Scholer, '1 Timothy 2.9-15 and the Place of Women in the Church's Ministry', in *A Feminist Companion to the Deutero-Pauline Epistles* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003) 98-121 (101-3).
- 3 A. Baum, 'Paul's Conflicting Statements of Female Public Speaking (1 Cor 11:5) and Silence (1 Cor 14:34-35): A New Suggestion', *TynBul* 65 (2014) 247-74, at 254.
- 4 C. L. Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) 22.
- 5 Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 164. See also U. Wäger, *Die Ordnung des 'Hauses Gottes': Der Ort von Frauen in der Ekklesiologie und Ethik der Pastoralbriefe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994) 95; B. Fiore, 'Household Rules at Ephesus: Good News, Bad News, No News', *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. J. T. Fitzgerald, T. H. Olbricht and L. M. White; NovTSupp 110; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 589-607, at 601-2; H.-U. Wiemer, 'Die gute Ehefrau im Wandel der Zeiten: von Xenophon zu Plutarch', *Hermes* 133 (2005) 424-46; A. Merz, 'Gen(de)red power: Die Macht des Genres im Streit um die Frauenrolle in Pastoralbriefen und Paulusakten', *HvTSt* 68 (2012) 1-10, at 3, 8; K. Zamfir, 'Is the *ekklesia* a Household (of God)? Reassessing the Notion of οἶκος θεοῦ in 1 Tim 3.15', *NTS* 60 (2014) 511-28, at 527. Jorunn Økland has made a helpful correction in her argument that the *ekklesia* did not belong to either the public or private sphere. However, she also accepted the public/private dichotomy as a gendered divide corresponding to household and public spaces. See J. Økland, *Women in their Place:*

This article seeks to correct a mistake that is common in New Testament scholarship, which the above quote from Baum exemplifies: namely, it is correct to say that ‘the ancients distinguished between a public and private sphere’, but not that ‘the private sphere was located in private houses’ and the public sphere included everything outside. Rather, a good deal of ‘public’ activity took place inside of houses, while many functions that were considered ‘private’ occurred outside them. The overlap between public and private functions and space makes the neat divisions of modern scholarship untenable.

Understanding how people in the first century conceived of public and private is a step towards rethinking the evidence for women’s participation in that time period. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a theory explaining the varied evidence regarding that subject. Instead, I will argue that scholars should abandon the public/private divide as a way of accounting for women’s roles and should seek more precise terminology that better fits the available evidence.

This article proceeds in three sections. First, I describe how the familiar descriptions of public and private entered biblical studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Contemporary debates have been shaped by interventions of feminist scholars, who sought to explain and counteract the exclusion of women from politics, education and business. Such arguments had considerable success for those purposes. But they were not arguments about the social history of the first- and second-century Mediterranean world and should not be used for that purpose.

Second, I describe what the words public and private did and did not mean in the first century. The ancients had notions of public and private – indeed, our English words are descendants of the Latin. Yet the current definitions of these terms are not equivalent to their first-century meanings. One of the ancient meanings was functional: as a designation for kinds of activity, the public was a narrow range of political functions while the private was a much wider set of activities. Another meaning was spatial: the *domus* or οἶκος was privately owned space, while land that was publicly owned or publicly accessible was labelled ‘public’. However, there was no direct overlap of the functional meaning of public with the spatial meaning (and likewise, no overlap of private functions and spaces). Homes often hosted public functions, and public squares were sites of competition among private interests.

In the third section, I shift to an analysis of actions of New Testament women that might be considered public in one of these senses. If people of this period had distinct, gendered spheres of influence, we should not find much evidence of women taking on public roles or moving in public spaces. On the contrary, however, ancient sources often noted women doing these things, and the New

---

*Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space* (London: T&T Clark, 2004) 38, 58, 140–1.

Testament writings were no exception. Women exercised social and political influence and travelled between and within cities. Moreover, their actions were recorded as if they were unremarkable. The textual evidence goes beyond the conventional interpretation that women were restricted to the private sphere.

### 1. Public and Private in New Testament Studies

In the early 1990s, feminist scholars like Kathleen Corley and Karen Jo Torjesen drew on the work of anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain. In a chapter written with Virginia Burrus, Torjesen argued that ancient discourse made a sharp distinction between the male public realm and the private or domestic arena. They cited Rosaldo's argument that 'the public-versus-private distinction is a universal – though "non-necessary" – aspect of culture and society.'<sup>6</sup> Corley agreed that the public/private distinction 'governed all definitions of a woman's place in ancient society'. She wrote, 'Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Jean Bethke Elshtain have established that this separation of men and women according to public and private spheres has existed throughout much of Western history.'<sup>7</sup> Corley later cited both Elshtain and Torjesen in her conclusion that 'public and open areas were the sphere of men and not of respectable women, who were relegated to the private sphere of the household'.<sup>8</sup>

Rosaldo had argued that 'human cultural and social forms have always been male dominated'.<sup>9</sup> Central to her observation was the distinction between the domestic, defined as a 'locale where kinfolk share a living space and mothers do the day-by-day providing', and the public, a broader realm of male-dominated activity.<sup>10</sup> Rosaldo argued that 'in all known human groups ... the vast majority of opportunities for public influence and prestige, the ability to forge relationships, determine enmities, speak up in public, use or forswear the use of force are all recognized as men's privilege and right'.<sup>11</sup> The distinction between public and private helped explain women's subordinate position in society.

6 K. J. Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) 83 n. 7.

7 K. E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 15–16.

8 Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals*, 39.

9 M. Z. Rosaldo, 'The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding', *Signs* 5 (1980) 389–417, at 390. See also M. Z. Rosaldo, 'Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview', in *Woman, Culture, and Society* (ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

10 Rosaldo, 'Use and Abuse of Anthropology', 407.

11 Rosaldo, 'Use and Abuse of Anthropology', 394.

Political theorist Jean Bethke Elstain was also prominent in the thinking of scholars like Corley. Elstain's *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* traced the notion of public and private in thinkers 'representative of the Western political tradition'.<sup>12</sup> She argued that 'distinctions between public and private have been and remain fundamental, not incidental or tangential, ordering principles in all known societies save, perhaps, the most simple'.<sup>13</sup> Like Rosaldo, Elstain claimed that the distinction between public and private was endemic to human organisation.

Neither Rosaldo nor Elstain made a historical argument about the use of public and private in ancient Mediterranean cultures. Indeed, Rosaldo did not address the ancient Mediterranean at all as an example. Elstain made assertions about the early church period, but cited no historical sources dating from the long period between Aristotle and Augustine.<sup>14</sup> This is not a criticism of either scholar's work, for neither pursued a historical analysis of the Roman period. They were instead focused on modern assertions about gender and the ways in which women's lives were shaped by political philosophy. As Carole Pateman observed, 'Although some feminists treat the dichotomy (between the private and the public) as a universal, trans-historical and trans-cultural feature of human existence, feminist criticism is primarily directed at the separation and opposition between the public and private spheres in liberal theory and practice.'<sup>15</sup> Rosaldo and Elstain were rightly concerned to describe and critique the definition of public and private spheres in the modern experience because of the way this division both obscured and undergirded the subjection of women.<sup>16</sup> However, contemporary conceptions are not useful as sources for understanding the Roman period.

Feminist theorists such as these can help ancient historians to sharpen our understanding of public and private by attending to the sources of our own conceptions. In turn, we can then examine whether the evidence of the first century is similar to or different from our modern conceptions. Two modern notions seem especially relevant to the application of the categories public and private to ancient women.

First, in nineteenth-century political philosophy, women came to be identified with a narrow realm of private affairs, while men were assigned the more encompassing domain of the public. As Leonore Davidoff wrote, 'the category "woman" was explicitly located within the construct of family and kinship, just as "man" was

12 J. B. Elstain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981<sup>2</sup>) 9.

13 Elstain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, 6.

14 Elstain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, chs. 1 and 2.

15 C. Pateman, 'Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy', *Public and Private in Social Life* (ed. S. I. Benn and G. F. Gaus; New York: St. Martin's, 1983) 281–305, at 281.

16 See, for example, Pateman, 'Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy', 281–303.

assumed within the economy, polity, and the realms of knowledge'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, wives were understood as subject to the authority of husbands even within the private realm. Thus, in modern thought the private sphere represents a very limited arena in which women exerted influence.

Second, in political theory the public sphere also represents an arena where rational dialogue takes place regarding matters of common concern. Jürgen Habermas described the 'public sphere' as a realm where individuals participated in civic discourse: 'By "the public sphere" we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.'<sup>18</sup> Essential to the emergence of the bourgeois state, the public sphere mediated between private interests and the modern state. Habermas' conception of the public sphere was spatial, identifying 'third spaces' such as the salons and coffee houses of the eighteenth century where dialogue about civic concerns took place. Habermas' work was a historical analysis of late-sixteenth to mid-twentieth century societies, in particular England, France and Germany.<sup>19</sup> The public sphere was essential to the development of capitalist and democratic forms of government in that timeframe.

While Habermas' work has been critiqued and expanded by feminist and other political theorists, it remains highly influential.<sup>20</sup> As Mary Ryan wrote, 'the word "public" has long served as the place-marker for the political ideal of open, inclusive, and effective deliberation about matters of common and critical concern'.<sup>21</sup> This notion has not only affected academic writings, but has seeped into the popular conception of the public sphere.

Thus, the modern notion of the 'public' often includes three elements: it is a traditionally male realm of influence; it is conceived of spatially; and it is strongly associated with the ideal of free speech. Even though Greek and Roman cultures had notions of public and private, there is no reason to expect that they were defined in the same way in which modern democratic societies have understood them. Furthermore, there are many indications that people in the first and second

17 L. Davidoff, 'Regarding Some "Old Husbands' Tales": Public and Private in Feminist History', *Feminism, the Public, and the Private* (ed. J. B. Landes; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 164–94, at 169.

18 J. Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article', *The Idea of the Public Sphere* (ed. J. Gripsrud *et al.*; Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010) 114–20, at 114. See also J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans. Thomas Burger; Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989) 27–31.

19 On the Greek and Roman origins, see Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 3–4.

20 For critique of Habermas, see N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); *eadem*, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text* 25/6 (1990) 56–80; S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

21 M. P. Ryan, 'Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America', *Feminism, the Public, and the Private*, 195–222, at 195.

centuries had different senses of public and private. In the sections that follow, I explore conceptions of public and private in the early Roman period.

## 2. Public and Private in the Early Roman Period

Women of the early Roman period were often associated with the household and its functions. Sometimes this association was imagined spatially, as the space of the domus or οἶκος was the woman's terrain, while exterior spaces were coded as male. Two such statements date to the early Roman period. In a discussion of the commandment against murder, Philo argued that this commandment covered many crimes, including women who physically defended their husbands. He introduced the discussion with a reminder that women were assigned to the business of the household (οἰκουρία, *Spec.* 3.169), and men to assemblies and legal affairs. Philo's argument was not that women were or should be literally restricted indoors. Instead, he asserted that the seventh commandment prohibited not only murder but also many other violent crimes, including women who took violent action to defend their husbands. Philo drew on conventions that imagined the pursuit of justice as a male domain, and he could use these conventions to characterise the actions by women as dishonourable. But his larger point was that right moral order was encapsulated by Jewish legal precepts.

The other source is Columella's writings on agriculture. He also drew on venerable ancient sources, citing Xenophon's much earlier work (and Cicero's Latin translation of it), to repeat the traditional gendered division of labour. Reflecting the new social realities, however, Columella expressed the caveat that among elite families, the division was now reflected in the tasks of the *villicus* and *villica* who oversaw the production efforts of the household (*Rust.* 12.1–3), rather than the *dominus* and *matrona* of the household. Columella's description of the *villica* also suggested a wide scope of activities assigned to women, even in the ideal. She was responsible for the inspection, storage, organisation and maintenance of supplies, including food, utensils, furniture, clothing, weapons and wool-working tools. She ensured that food was provided for all members of the household. She cared for the sick, supervised enslaved people or other workers, and spent any spare time working wool herself. Although her work was imagined as 'indoor' (12.pref.1–4), even in this ideal description the *villica* supervised the work of the stables and sheepfolds (12.3.8–9).

Even if Philo and Columella were the only extant evidence, it seems difficult to conclude on this basis alone that women were strictly confined to the 'private' realm – especially if we mean a nineteenth-century version of this ideal that included only housecleaning, cooking and childcare. Both authors stated that judicial or military functions were the rightful domains of men. However, a large span of functions over which women were responsible fell outside this realm.

But these two authors are not our only sources of information about the roles of men and women in the period. The evidence that we have suggests that the reality was even more complex. In this section, I explore the meaning of the Greek and Latin words approximating the meaning of ‘public’ and ‘private’. For comparison with the New Testament period, I consider only sources from the first century BCE through the second century CE. Because there is recent scholarly agreement about the meaning of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in Latin texts, I cite representative Latin sources along with examples of the scholarly discussion.<sup>22</sup> I have not found a parallel discussion of the Greek words, and so I provide more extensive citations of Greek primary sources in the footnotes, although these are still representative rather than exhaustive.

There were three primary senses of public in sources of the period. In both Greek and Latin, ‘public’ (δημόσιος and κοινός in Greek; *publicus* in Latin) designated: (1) the highest political offices and the authority by which their holders acted on behalf of the state; and (2) ownership by the people, especially of money, land or slaves. Furthermore, the Latin *publicus* could also refer to (3) accessible places such as the roads of a city. In some of these instances, the ancient sources contained a contrast between public and private that helps to sharpen the definition. I describe each of these meanings in turn, identifying elements of the ancient meaning that differ from modern dimensions of public and private.

### 2.1 Public Action

As a description of action, ‘public’ had a narrow meaning in the first and second centuries. Public business was that which was transacted on behalf of the state, while ‘private’ referred to personal or household affairs. Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote of two consuls who ‘resolved that both private and public business (τὰ τε ἰδιωτικὰ καὶ τὰ δημόσια) be conducted according to the law’ (*Ant. Rom.* 10.1.2).<sup>23</sup> This pairing of public and private occurred frequently in both Greek and Latin writings of the early Roman period, and represented one of the main distinctions between the two spheres.

Roman orators referred to their political entity as the *res publica*, often translated as ‘state’ or ‘republic’, although distinct from modern concepts of the state. Cicero wrote that the ‘*res publica* ... is the entity owned by the people’ (*Rep.* 1.26.41), although this was more an idealisation of the role of the *populus* than

22 For agreement on the definitions of ‘public’ and ‘private’, see e.g. A. Winterling, *Politics and Society in Imperial Rome* (trans. K. Lüdtke; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) ch. 4; A. Russell, *The Politics of Public Space in Republican Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) ch. 2.

23 All Greek translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. Numbering follows the *Thesaurus linguae Graecae*.



a democratic reality.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the period, the phrase *res publica* regularly referred to the functions of state that were exercised by the elite (e.g. Livy 26.12.8; Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.4) or to the common good (e.g. Cicero, *De or.* 2.124; Quintilian, *Inst.* 12.1.42). The discussion of actions that were deemed ‘public’ concerned actions taken on behalf of the *res publica*.

Public acts were judicial and legislative functions exercised on behalf of the state. For instance, when a proconsul exercised his office, he did so as a ‘public’ person. One example is seen in the elder Seneca’s story of Flamininus, who was dining with a prostitute who lamented she had never seen anyone killed. Flamininus ordered the beheading of a condemned criminal to fulfil her wish (*Controversiae* 9.2). The incident raised the question of whether Flamininus’ use of his authority brought disrepute on the Roman people as a whole. At issue was neither the execution per se nor the relationship with a prostitute. Seneca’s characters objected to the exercise of state authority at the suggestion of a prostitute. ‘When he commits adultery ... he sins as a private citizen (*civis*). When he executes a man, he is exercising public authority (*auctoritate publica utitur*) ... The majesty of the Roman people is harmed by someone when he acts in the name of the state (*publico nomine facit*)’ (*Controversiae* 9.2.14, trans. M. Winterbottom).<sup>25</sup> This execution was undertaken for personal reasons in the proconsul’s dining room. Yet it was described as a public action because it involved the exercise of state authority.

When a proconsul physically returned to Rome at the end of his term of office, he relinquished his public role and became a private person. One important distinction was that public persons were shielded from lawsuits, while private citizens could potentially be sued for actions taken in office. Julius Caesar, for example, negotiated the extension of his term as governor of Gaul in order to delay returning to private citizenship, because he expected to be tried for actions taken as consul (Suetonius, *Jul.* 23, 30).<sup>26</sup> Thus one important distinction between public and private functions was that public officials were temporarily protected from such lawsuits for the sake of their ability to govern.

For elite men, the authors and audience of most extant writings, *publicus* and *domus* served in this way as conceptual opposites. Similarly, in Greek, ἴδιος was paired with δημόσιος or κοινός, as in the example of Dionysius above.<sup>27</sup> High-

24 For discussion, see J. Harries, ‘Servius, Cicero and the Res Publica of Justinian’, *Cicero’s Law: Rethinking Roman Law of the Late Republic* (ed. P. J. du Plessis; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) 123–41, at 132–7.

25 See also Livy 39.42–3; Tacitus *Ann.* 13.4.

26 See J. T. Ramsey, ‘The Proconsular Years: Politics at a Distance’, *A Companion to Julius Caesar* (ed. M. Griffin; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 37–56, at 37, 48.

27 See also e.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 9.49.1; 10.1.2, 3.3, 48.2, 55.5; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.261; Artemidorus, *Onir.* 1.2.44; 1.4.; Plutarch, *Lyc.* 25.4; *Fab.* 14.7. See also Plutarch’s contrast between Persian kings and the private citizen (ιδιώτης ἀνὴρ, *Conj. praec.* 16).

status men might aspire to participate in such public actions, and they saw this realm as separate from that of their own household interests. This sense of 'public' described a small proportion of Roman men who were of high enough status to achieve such offices. In the imperial period, Augustus' consolidation of power restricted this number further, so that many scholars identify him as the only public person.<sup>28</sup> But sources of the period still used the conventional pairing of public and private affairs.

However, even for the elite class, the opposition between public and private was conceptual rather than practical. Political manoeuvring took place in private spaces, as in the example of Flamininus above. But Flamininus' action was not controversial because of its setting at dinner. As Harriet Fertik has argued, 'the house served not as a retreat but as a setting for social and political activity'.<sup>29</sup> High-status men often made political alliances and policy decisions in their homes.

Public functions could be exercised in household spaces. Many legal cases were tried in homes. Vitruvius argued that the architecture of homes should be modified to reflect the social status of the occupant: 'for persons of high rank who hold offices and magistracies, and whose duty it is to serve the state, we must provide princely vestibules, lofty halls and very spacious peristyles ... libraries and basilicas arrayed in a similar fashion with the magnificence of public structures (*publicorum operum*), because, in such palaces, public deliberations and private trials and judgments (*publica consilia et private iudicia arbitriaque*) are often transacted' (6.5.2, trans. F. Granger).<sup>30</sup> Large rooms in elite homes mirrored the architecture of public structures, and this was deemed appropriate because of their dual function. Other sources suggest that a cubiculum or triclinium was viewed as an inappropriate place for a trial, but a larger room in a house was deemed suitable.<sup>31</sup>

28 See especially K. Milnor, *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 20–1; Winterling, *Politics and Society*, 71–2; Russell, *Politics of Public Space*, 191. For primary sources, see Pliny, *Ep.* 2.1.2; 5.3.5; Tacitus, *Agr.* 39.2; *Hist.* 1.49.

29 H. Fertik, 'Privacy and Power: The *De Clementia* and the Domus Aurea', *Public and Private in the Roman House and Society* (ed. K. Tuori and L. Nissin; JRA Supplement Series 102; Portsmouth, RI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2015) 17–29, at 17. See also S. Speksnijder, 'Beyond "Public" and "Private": Accessibility and Visibility during *Salutationes*', *Public and Private in the Roman House and Society*, 87–99; A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The Social Structure of the Roman House', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 56 (1988) 43–97, at 45–57.

30 For discussion, see L. Bablitz, 'Bringing the Law Home: The Roman House as Courtroom', *Public and Private in the Roman House and Society*, 63–76.

31 Bablitz argued that trials probably took place on the *oecus*, a raised surface within the peristyle of some homes. Bablitz, 'Bringing the Law Home', 67–8. See Seneca, *Controversiae* 9.2.4 for the suggestion that a triclinium was not an appropriate venue.

However, even if they were not suitable for trials, smaller rooms of homes were often the location for important matters. The atrium of a large house was accessible to lower-class clients who would visit their patron, but higher-class persons and peers might be invited to transact business or political negotiations in a *cubiculum*, one of the rooms typically located off the atrium or peristyle.<sup>32</sup> An invitation into the smaller spaces of the household suggested the higher status of the guest.

The definition of public functions as those undertaken on behalf of the state left a wide arena that could be classified as private. As Kate Cooper has argued, ‘Romans drew the distinction between “the public” and “the private” ... in terms of proprietary interest. This meant that production and commerce fell, along with the household, on the “private” side of the divide.’<sup>33</sup> Thus, in contrast to the public/private division of the nineteenth century, ancient private life involved a larger variety of tasks, such as business, education and trade. In addition, one’s personal affairs required the maintenance of the social relationships that were essential to most of these tasks. In this way, a wide proportion of ancient activity was conceived of as private.

Just as political and civic affairs were not conducted exclusively outside the home, so also domestic matters were not confined to the space of the *domus* or οἶκος. Private actions occurred both inside and outside the physical household. For example, securing supplies, finding buyers for goods, operating a stall in the market, registering property for taxation purposes would have been considered one’s private or domestic interests. Yet none of these happened exclusively within household spaces.

Women were rightly involved in private pursuits. Many inscriptions and papyri attest to the broad range of activities that women undertook as they managed their private affairs. A number of these tasks would be labelled ‘public’ in modern life. For example, many inscriptions honoured women who served in civic and religious offices, often with the same titles men held.<sup>34</sup> An interesting example for the purposes of this article is Pompeii’s *sacerdos publica*, public priestess.<sup>35</sup> Although there were household forms of devotion and household gods, religion

32 A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) chs. 1–2; A. M. Riggsby, “Public” and “Private” in Roman Culture: The Case of the *Cubiculum*, *JRA* 10 (1997) 36–56; S. Treggiari, ‘Home and Forum: Cicero between “Public” and “Private”’, *TAPhA* 128 (1998) 1–23.

33 K. Cooper, ‘Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in the Roman *Domus*’, *Past and Present* 197 (2007) 3–33, at 21.

34 See e.g. R. van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996); E. A. Hemelrijk, *Hidden Lives, Public Personae: Women and Civic Life in the Roman West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

35 See e.g. the Pompeii inscriptions honouring Mamia, *CIL* x.816; Eumachia, *CIL* x.810, 811.

was a matter of great civic importance in this period. The title of this office suggests its importance to the people as a whole. As Roy Bowen Ward has argued, the women who held the title exerted considerable influence in their city.<sup>36</sup> Women like these did not take on the formal decision-making powers of government, yet their social power was considerable, and it extended beyond the walls of their homes.

Other examples of women's private interests include the many letters and documents that point to women's ownership and management of businesses.<sup>37</sup> Papyri recorded women registering property for taxation purposes (e.g. *P.Grenf.* II.45a) and petitioning the local ruler regarding legal matters (e.g. *P.Turner* 24; *P.Oxy.* L.3555). Recent studies have shown that the guardianship of women was a legal formality rather than a real limitation on women's participation in these matters.<sup>38</sup> Women's pursuit of these tasks fits with the ancient association of women with the private realm.

In sum, the writings of elite men supported a conceptual divide between public and private activities or functions. Public acts were those taken on behalf of the state, and private affairs encompassed most other matters. Yet while 'public' identified a specific realm of activity in contrast to the private or domestic, the words 'public' and 'private' did not identify the location of the action. Furthermore, public action was a relatively small slice of activity (compared to the modern use of the term), and the larger arena was labelled 'private'. Women were associated with this wider, private realm of activity.

## 2.2 Public Ownership

The word 'public' also identified ownership by the people. The Latin phrase *in publicum* often referred to funds being deposited in the state treasury. For example, Livy told of a crisis that arose when the state appropriated the slaves and wealth of citizens for the military. The consul Laevinus proposed that senators impose a similar burden on themselves: 'gold, silver, coined bronze, let us senators bring it all into the treasury (*in publicum*) tomorrow', which the senators readily agreed to (Livy 26.36.5, 11, trans. F. G. Moore).<sup>39</sup> These funds were viewed as being owned by the state.

36 R. B. Ward, 'The Public Priestesses of Pompeii', *The Early Church in its Context: Essays in Honor of Everett Ferguson* (ed. A. J. Malherbe, F. W. Norris and J. W. Thompson; NovTSup 90; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 318–34.

37 E.g. *P.Oxy.* III.493, VI.932, XXXIII.2680; *BGU* II.601, II.602, IV.1097; *P.Mil.Vogl.* II.77.

38 For discussion, see J. A. Sheridan, 'Women without Guardians: An Updated List', *BASP* 33 (1996) 117–31; B. Kelly, 'Proving the *ius liberorum*: P.Oxy. 12.1467 Reconsidered', *GRBS* 57 (2017) 105–35; S. E. Hylan, *Women in the New Testament World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) 67–8.

39 See also Livy 4.10.6, 15.8; 5.22.1, 23.10, 50.7; 10.23.11; 26.36.5.

Greek-speaking people also used the words δημόσιος and κοινός in this sense. Across different parts of the Mediterranean, many writers indicated expenditures made out of the treasury. Josephus wrote of a time when a general of Artaxerxes forced the Jewish people to pay a sum from the public treasury prior to the daily sacrifices (*Ant.* 11.298). Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Plutarch and other Greek writers used similar phrases in their works.<sup>40</sup>

In this sense, the word 'public' could indicate anything funded from the treasury. Enslaved persons owned by the state were described as public slaves. For example, Strabo wrote that the Lacedaemoneans held the Helots as state slaves (δημοσίους δούλους) (8.5.4).<sup>41</sup> A parallel phrase, *servus publicus*, was also used by Latin writers.<sup>42</sup> Funerals were sometimes funded by cities to honour the deceased person's contributions, and so there were many references to 'public funerals' in both Greek and Latin.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, 'public sacrifices' were those funded by the city rather than an individual or group.<sup>44</sup>

Land also could be owned by the state, and in this sense a space could be designated as public. Dionysius used δημόσιος this way frequently in discussing distribution of public lands. For example, Tullus 'assigned sufficient public land to the labourers' (*Rom. Ant.* 2.31.3).<sup>45</sup> Public lands might be loaned, sold or occupied by individuals (e.g. Livy 31.13.5–9; 41.27.10; 44.16.7; Cicero, *Ep.* 2.15; *Agr.* 3.1).

Public ownership was sometimes contrasted with privately held goods or land. For example, Dionysius wrote of a time when 'Romans did not receive pay for military service from public funds (ἐκ τοῦ δημοσίου), but served at their own expense (τοῖς ἰδίοις τέλεισιν)' (*Rom. Ant.* 4.19.3). In other cases, privately funded buildings or other projects were contrasted with those paid for from the treasury.<sup>46</sup>

40 For example, using δημόσιος: Dionysius, *Ant. Rom.* 2.6.2, 10.2; 3.22.10; 4.9.7; 5.11.3, 31.3, 69.1; 6.29.4, 30.2; 8.55.5; 10.21.6; Plutarch, *Sol.* 21.2.4; 24.2.1; *Fab.* 22.6.3; *Cor.* 20.5.3; Lucian, *Sat.* 24; Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.29.16; Josephus, *Vita* 200. κοινός was less frequently used in this way: e.g. Dionysius, *Ant. Rom.* 7.20.2; 8.70.5; Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 1.82.3.

41 See also Dionysius, *Ant. Rom.* 1.40.5; Artemidorus, *Onir.* 5.25; Chariton, *Chaer.* 3.4.7; Plutarch, *Cat. Maj.* 6.2.2.

42 For Latin examples, see Valerius Maximus 2.10.6; 3.2.ext.6; Velleius Paterculus, *Hist.* 2.19.3.

43 E.g. Dionysius, *Ant. Rom.* 9.27.2; Josephus *J.W.* 2.455; Plutarch, *Num.* 22.1; *Publ.* 23.4.2; *Fab.* 27.3.1; Dio Chrysostom, *Grat.* 4; Lucian, *Demon.* 67; Pausanias, *Descr.* 8.11.6; Lesbos, *Protrepitkos A* 19.6. See also Livy 30.44.10.

44 E.g. Dionysius, *Ant. Rom.* 10.54; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.233, 237; Plutarch, *Cor.* 37.4.6; *Num.* 16.1; Aelius Aristides, *Sacred Tales* 3; Pausanias, *Descr.* 8.41.6.

45 See also e.g. Dionysius, *Ant. Rom.* 2.62.4; 3.31.3; 4.9.8; 5.25.2, 40.5; 8.72.1; Dio Chrysostom, *Rhod.* 54.

46 E.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 2.3.3; 2.74.4; 4.44.2; 7.63.2; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.55; Aelius Aristides, *Smyranean Oration* 232.22; Pausanias, *Descr.* 5.22.1; Artemidorus, *Onir.* 2.30.

But a third category of ownership was also possible in addition to public and private: the sacred (*sacer* or ἱερός). This was land occupied by temples and shrines, or the lands that produced revenue for them. It was not simply that such land was considered holy; *sacer* or ἱερός designated land that was owned by the gods.<sup>47</sup> Because of this, ancient writers could distinguish between ‘public’ and ‘sacred’ places. For example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus described young foreigners who had ostensibly gone to Rome to see the games: ‘most stayed in sacred (ἱεροῖς) or public places (δημοσίοις τόποις), not having lodgings in homes (ἐν οἰκίαις) or with friends’ (8.3.1).<sup>48</sup> Josephus wrote of a disputed date that was not preserved in either sacred or public monuments (οὐτ’ ἐν ἱεροῖς οὐτ’ ἐν δημοσίοις ἀναθήμασιν, *Apion* 1.11).

Even in this basic designation of ownership, the ancient conception went beyond the modern division into public and private. As Amy Russell has argued, ‘non-domestic space was not uniformly public’.<sup>49</sup> The absence of the sacred as a spatial category in the modern imagination is another indicator that current conceptions of public and private are not well suited to the New Testament period.

### 2.3 Publicly Accessible Space

In Latin, the phrase *in publicum* could also refer to people moving about in the streets of a city. As Aloys Winterling wrote, ‘the city’s streets, squares, and edifices represented an independent cultural space accessible to all citizens, in contrast to the houses from which it was distinguished’.<sup>50</sup> For example, Livy wrote that the people, fooled into thinking a crisis was at hand, ‘rushed out terrified into the streets (*in publicum*)’ (9.24.10). In another instance, Livy told of a family under attack trying to escape from the house ‘into the streets’ (24.26.12).<sup>51</sup> In these cases, public space indicated areas with unrestricted access.

Unlike the Latin, the Greek words δημόσιος and κοινός were infrequently used in this sense. The Greek words indicated public ownership or function, and only very rarely implied this sense of publicly accessible space.<sup>52</sup> Greek authors were more likely to employ a descriptive phrase such as ‘in the streets’.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to modern terminology, then, in which to ‘go out in

47 Russell, *Politics of Public Space*, 4, 29. Russell also notes that the distinctions were sometimes overlapping. See ch. 5.

48 See also Dionysius, *Rom. Ant.* 6.90.3; 7.72.13; 9.60.5.

49 Russell, *Politics of Public Space*, 33.

50 Winterling, *Politics and Society*, 58.

51 See also Livy 8.28.5; 23.9.13; 26.9.7, 13.1; 39.14.2; Cicero, *Verr.* 2.1.80; *Mil.* 33.

52 Among hundreds of citations in this time period in the *TLG*, I found only a few where δημόσιος may mean publicly accessible space. These include: Lucian, *Anach.* 22; *Fug.* 18; Artemidorus, *Onir.* 1.8; Polyaeus 3.9.30; Chariton, *Chaer.* 1.1.16.

53 E.g. Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 12.41.6; 13.57.2; Philo, *Flacc.* 36.4; Strabo, *Descr.* 3.4.16.

public' can mean simply to walk down the street, Greek-speaking people did not describe the streets as 'public'.

Thus, while 'public' described political functions and certain spaces, these meanings of the word did not overlap. The public functions of elite men were not imagined as appropriate in public spaces. This was true even in Latin, where *publicus* was used to refer both to public acts and accessible spaces. Public actions did not necessarily take place in the publicly accessible arena designated by a phrase like *in publicum*. Nor were such roads or squares designated for political purposes. I explore this further below in relation to the Forum Romanum.

Furthermore, when used spatially in this sense of accessibility, public spaces were not designated for speech. It was surprisingly rare for occasions of political speech to be described as 'public', or as occurring 'in public'. Valerius Maximus wrote that when Scipio was killed, Macedonicus 'dashed into public and with sorrowing face and choking voice, 'Assemble, citizens, assemble', he cried, 'the walls of our city have been toppled. Villainous hands have been laid on Scipio Africanus as he slept in his home' (4.1.12, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey). Here, although *in publicum* marked the location in which Macedonicus called for an assembly of citizens, it could be translated as above, 'into the streets'. Neither Greek nor Roman authors designated arenas where political speeches were made as public spaces.

Women's movement in accessible spaces was commonplace. Women travelled both within and between cities to pursue their business and familial interests. Evidence of travel includes inscriptions honouring or erected by the same woman in multiple locations.<sup>54</sup> Women's letters also stated information about their travel plans. For example, Arsinoe wrote to her sister, 'If the roads are firm, I shall go immediately to your [tenant] farmer and ask him for your rents' (*P.Oxy.* 33.2680).<sup>55</sup> The matter-of-fact tone suggests such travel was conventional.

In modern notions, 'public' often describes everything outside private property. But ancient notions were different. The Greek δημόσιος was only rarely used in this sense. Latin writers could use *publicus* to refer to streets and other open areas, but this use of the word did not overlap with the two meanings discussed above. Streets were not spaces intended for political functions, nor were they designated as owned by the people. The association of women with private life did not restrict them from entering the accessible parts of the city.

54 See, for example, the inscriptions regarding Iunia Prokla, Iunia Theodora or Claudia Metrodora: R. A. Kearsley, 'Women in Public Life in the Roman East: Iunia Theodora, Claudia Metrodora, and Phoebe, benefactress of Paul', *TynBul* 50 (1999) 189–210; N. G. Ashton and G. H. R. Horsley, 'A Rediscovered *arkhisynagogos* Inscription from Thessaloniki, and an intriguing Iulia Prokla', *Tyche* 31 (2016) 1–23.

55 See also *P.Oxy.* xiv.1758; *BGU* xiii.2350; *P.Mil.Vogl.* II.77; and the discussion in R. S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 BC–AD 800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006) 81–3.

#### 2.4 *A Test Case: In What Sense Was the Forum 'Public'?*

The Forum Romanum provides an interesting example of how the meanings of 'public' and 'private' in antiquity differed from modern usage. From a modern perspective, the Forum may seem to be the quintessential public site of the ancient world. It was both publicly owned and publicly accessible. What is more, the Forum was a primary location for political speeches and other political manoeuvring in Rome.

Yet ancient texts contradict this expectation. In searching the Library of Latin Texts, I found no instances in which the Forum was labelled as 'public'. Moreover, in a couple of cases, the streets *around* the Forum bore this label. For example, Livy wrote that 'people left the Forum and went out into the streets (*in publicum*)' (2.23.8, trans. B. O. Foster). Livy used 'public' to describe the accessible streets of the city in contrast to the Forum itself. In a second example, Cato spoke of women who 'rush out into the streets (*in publicum*) and barely refrain from entering the forum and a public meeting (*contione*)' (34.3.6, trans. E. Sage). Notice it was the streets that Livy deemed 'public'. The Latin term used to describe the meeting in the Forum, though rendered as 'public' in order to make better sense in English, did not include *publicus*. Thus, although the Forum was a primary location for discourse about the *res publica*, the space itself was not described as public.

The political function of the Forum also made it a prime location for competing private interests. As Russell has argued, the buildings that surrounded the Forum were a mix of civic and private ownership.<sup>56</sup> Public buildings were often named after families and thus marked by private interests. Indeed, public and private were categories manipulated by individuals and families to gain honour. Elements of public architecture were used in private homes to convey the political influence of the inhabitants, while sponsoring a building or statue visible in the Forum displayed prestige.

Although the Forum was certainly imagined as the domain of elite male citizens, the practice was different. It was a busy intersection of Roman streets and a place of business. Men and women, enslaved and free, citizens and foreigners made their way through the Forum or conducted business there every day.<sup>57</sup> Even if we imagine that elite men clustered around the rostrum during political speeches and voting, other people also had business in the Forum or were simply passing through.

Even the Forum Romanum was not easily categorised – either in ancient or modern terms – as public or private. It was a widely accessible space with an important political function that individuals capitalised upon to pursue their familial interests. Although it seems to fit the modern notion of the public

<sup>56</sup> Russell, *Politics of Public Space*, ch. 4.

<sup>57</sup> For discussion, see Russell, *Politics of Public Space*, 61–2, 189.



sphere because of it was space used for speaking about the common good, it was not described as ‘public’ at the time.

#### 4. Women’s Presence and Action in the New Testament

In this section, I briefly explore whether the New Testament conforms to modern expectations that women were restricted to the household and private affairs. If women were commonly restricted to the private, and New Testament authors shared this view, we should see those assumptions reflected in the way stories involving women were told. In this section, I explore a number of passages in which women exercised political and social influence or moved about in accessible spaces.

In each of these examples, I am not assuming that New Testament authors gave accurate information about real, historical women. Instead, I am interested in how the narrative presented actions as normal or conventional. The actions of women were often not the focal point of the story, but were mentioned in passing, without any indication that a reader should find the circumstances unusual. In this way, the New Testament writers gave a sense of what ancient readers took for granted about women’s behaviour. These texts reflected the conventional practices of women using social and political influence and moving freely outside their homes.

In a couple of examples, elite women exerted influence on political events. Matthew wrote that in Jesus’ trial before Pilate, ‘while [Pilate] was seated on the judgement seat, his wife sent a message to him: “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for I suffered greatly today because of a dream about him”’ (Matt 27.19). This is only one verse, and it may or may not record actual events. Nevertheless, we can learn quite a lot from it. Pilate’s wife inserted herself into a legal trial. She did not have authority to judge Jesus, but her attempt at influence was not framed as inappropriate. She provided information to Pilate from a dream she had, which she interpreted as pointing to Jesus’ innocence. The tone of her message suggests that she expected Pilate to pay attention to her views. Romans viewed it as appropriate for rulers to use dreams and other signs in making decisions. Matthew did not suggest that she directly swayed Pilate’s decision. Indeed, Pilate subsequently seemed more concerned about his own innocence than Jesus’ (27.24). But her insertion of her experience would have made sense to ancient readers as part of a picture Matthew developed, which maintained Jesus’ innocence or righteousness (cf. 12.7; 23.35; 27.4) and laid blame for Jesus’ death on the Jewish people rather than Pilate (27.24–6).

It is difficult to characterise the actions of Pilate’s wife as solely public or private. The trial took place in or immediately outside the praetorium, which was both a conventional place for legal proceedings and Pilate’s residence in

Jerusalem. Pilate's wife made no appearance at the trial. However, her message contributed information that was likely to be considered relevant in that context. Furthermore, from Matthew's perspective, she was correct in her interpretation that Jesus was an innocent man. Pilate's wife communicated her opinion on a judicial proceeding as it was going on in or outside her home.

The other instance of overt political influence is Herodias' action to bring about the death of John the Baptist. In Mark's version of the story, Herodias was angered by John's criticism of her marriage to Herod as unlawful (Mark 6.18). She found her opportunity for revenge when 'Herod gave a dinner on his birthday for his officials and military officers and for the leading citizens of the Galilee' (6.21). Herodias' request resulted in the execution of a prisoner, which, as in the story of Favorinus above, was an act of official state power. Like Pilate's wife, Herodias did not hold any formal authority in the story. But she seized an opportunity to use the influence she had to further her own agenda. My point is not to specify the nature of Herodias' power but to demonstrate the difficulty of categorising her action as public or private.

In Acts, Luke identified the influence of 'leading women' on the spread of Paul's message. Sometimes their influence had negative effects, sometimes it was positive. In Antioch of Pisidia, Luke wrote that 'the Jews stirred up respectable, high-standing women and the leading men of the city and incited persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and they threw them out of the region' (Acts 13.50). In both Thessalonica (17.4) and Berea (17.12), leading women of the city were receptive to Paul's preaching. In each of these cases, Luke noted the presence of both women and men with high social status who influenced the spread of Paul's message. Today we consider religion a private affair, but there was no such distinction in antiquity. Worship of the gods ensured the stability of the city, and was therefore a matter of civic importance. The women in these stories were mentioned as part of large groups that either heard Paul's message or were incited against him. Women were presented as part of both the 'public perception' of Paul and as advocates of either receiving or rejecting his message.

Women were also noted as individual patrons. Luke wrote that Martha hosted Jesus in her home (Luke 10.38), and he also mentioned a group of women who provided for Jesus and his disciples (8.2-3; cf. Mark 15.41). Lydia prevailed upon Paul to stay with her in Phillipi (Acts 16.15), and her house was mentioned as a gathering for believers (16.40). Paul explicitly identified Phoebe as a patron (*προστώσις*, Rom 16.2). Other women hosted churches in their homes (Rom 16.5; cf. Col 4.15).<sup>58</sup> All of these acts were part of the social web we think of as patronage.

Women also sought the patronage of others. The request for James and John to be seated at Jesus' right hand and left hand was one such act of seeking patronage.

58 C. Osiek and M. Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) ch. 7.

Matthew narrated this request as coming from ‘the mother of the sons of Zebedee’ (Matt 20.20; cf. Mark 10.35, where James and John made this request themselves). Although the request represented some misunderstanding of Jesus or his ability to dispense this benefit, there was nothing surprising about a woman making it.

Even in less politically charged settings, the use of social influence can be difficult to categorise as public or private. Patronage was not ‘private’ in the modern sense of the word, even if it took place entirely within the household. Hosting a guest was not only a service to the visitor but something that brought honour to the household. The honour accrued gave tangible support to the social and economic relationships that sustained the household. Women competed for honour alongside men throughout the New Testament period.<sup>59</sup> Early readers of the New Testament would have understood these actions by women as both respectable and conventional behaviour.

Given modern assumptions of women’s restriction to the home, it may be useful to consider the movement of New Testament women or their appearances in publicly accessible spaces. Consider the way Luke indicated Mary’s travel: ‘In those days, Mary got up with haste and journeyed into the hills to a Judean city, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth’ (Luke 1.39–40; cf. 1.56). Mary’s travel was not described as if it were remarkable. Indeed, it appears as a narrative aside to bring together Mary, Elizabeth and their two pregnancies. Their meeting became the occasion for prophetic speech, first by Elizabeth and then by Mary (1.42–55). If it were unusual for women to travel at all, or to travel alone, it seems likely Luke that would have taken narrative steps to explain the situation to the reader, so that it would not appear unlikely or unseemly. The casual nature with which Luke connected these scenes to the larger narrative suggests that Mary’s actions were conventional.

Similarly, Luke later described the women patrons as being ‘with him [Jesus]’ (σὺν αὐτῷ, 8.1) as he travelled through cities and villages. Other women appeared as a matter of course in the events of Jesus’ ministry. The woman who anointed Jesus (Matt 26.6; Mark 14.3; Luke 7.37), the Syrophonecian woman (Mark 7.24–6) and the women who visited Jesus’ tomb (Matt 27.61; 28.1; Mark 15.47–16.1; Luke 23.55; 24.1; John 20.1) are examples of women whose movement in accessible spaces was recorded without apparent need for further comment.<sup>60</sup> Other women appeared incidentally in the story in open spaces of the city or countryside – like the women at the feeding of the 5,000 (Matt 14.21), the woman in a crowd who spoke to Jesus (Luke 11.27) or the women in the streets of Jerusalem as he made his way to be crucified (Luke

59 For discussion, see e.g. Z. Crook, ‘Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited’, *JBL* 128 (2009) 591–611; Hysten, *Women*, ch. 5; Osiek and MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place*, ch. 9.

60 In John, the dinner took place at Lazarus’ house, and it was not stated whether Mary, who anointed Jesus, resided in that house (John 12.1–3).

23.27). Readers would have interpreted these passages according to social norms that expected women's movement in accessible spaces.

The closing greetings of Paul's letter to the Romans are also interesting in the way that they indicate travel. Paul had not been to Rome when he wrote this letter, yet he greeted a large number of people there. Although it was possible that Paul knew some of the individuals by reputation alone, in a number of cases he indicated that he had met them before. In addition to Phoebe, who was travelling to Rome and was probably the bearer of the letter, Paul greeted Junia (16.7) and Rufus' mother (16.13), indicating explicitly that he had a prior relationship with these women. Thus, the greetings suggest that the women travelled from the cities of Greece or Asia Minor to Rome. The letter reinforces the notion that such travel was not unusual for the time.

### Conclusion

In the New Testament period, notions of public and private differed considerably from modern definitions of these terms. Although elite men wrote of the division of their own affairs into public and private, this was not the whole story. Political affairs often entered into the realm of the household, and household interests competed to mark publicly accessible spaces. The pursuit of interests the ancients defined as private – like business, education and social influence – often took men and women outside the household spaces imagined as 'private'.

Furthermore, the overlap between public functions and space that the modern concept of the 'public sphere' takes for granted did not exist in the ancient world. In the modern period, the connection of the word 'public' with space and speech seems natural. This overlap is important to Habermas' notion of the 'public sphere' as an element of civil society that undergirds democratic practices. Women have fought for access to this 'space'. But in the New Testament period, this overlap of the word 'public' with space and speech did not exist. Functions were described as public, and space could be owned by the public. But spaces where political functions happened were not described as public, nor did political functions necessarily happen on publicly owned land. Because of this, modern readers should be careful interpreting ancient sources that did not associate 'public' with spaces where speech about common interests took place.

For these reasons, it would be wise if we were to stop using the words 'public' and 'private' to explain conflicting evidence for women's participation in the early church and society at large. It may be that there are some contexts in which these words can be used without creating confusion. My preference is to use them sparingly, substituting more precise words such as civic, political, personal, familial and so forth. If we can describe women's actions in terms that made sense to people at the time, we may move closer to understanding how the conflicting patterns we see in the evidence made sense from an ancient perspective.