Qathi and Zhanni's Approaches to Understanding the Quran and Hadith: An Islamic Legal Perspective

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Abstract. *This research explores the qathi and zhanni approaches in understanding the texts of the Qur'an and Hadith as the primary sources of Islamic law. Qathi refers to texts with definitive authenticity and meaning, while zhanni pertains to texts that are speculative or open to interpretation. The distinction between the two has significant implications in legal reasoning, particularly in determining whether a text is subject to ijtihad (independent reasoning). This study analyzes both classical and contemporary scholarly perspectives on textual authority and emphasizes the importance of reason (ijtihad) in contextualizing Islamic teachings. The findings indicate that ijtihad is essential for interpreting zhanni texts, especially in addressing evolving social issues. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding that integrates both textual analysis and contextual awareness is crucial for formulating adaptive and relevant Islamic legal thought.*

Keywords: *Qathi, Zhanni, Text, Ijtihad, Sharia, Social Context*

INTRODUCTION

The Quran, as the final revelation revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), holds a central position in Islamic teachings (Alwani, 2019). For Muslims, the Quran is not only a spiritual scripture but also an epistemic foundation that governs belief, ethics, law, and civilization. It is regarded as *hudā li al-nās*, a guidance for humanity that shapes both personal piety and collective conduct. As a source of Islamic law, the Quran operates as a primary reference containing divine instructions that function in multiple dimensions: spiritual purification, moral cultivation, legal structure, and social transformation. The authenticity of its text, the depth of its meaning, and the comprehensiveness of its content make it the primary source of teachings, encompassing not only spiritual but also legal, social, and moral dimensions (Dalle & Tobroni, 2025). When Muslims engage with the Quran, they are not merely reading a historical scripture but interacting with a living source of normative authority. The unquestionable transmission of the Quran through *tawātur* reinforces its legal certainty and forms a foundation upon which the discipline of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) is established.

In addition to the Quran, the hadith the sayings, deeds, and decrees of the Prophet serve as an important guideline for explaining and detailing the teachings derived from the revelation (Thani et al., 2021). The hadith corpus operates as a practical and interpretive extension of Quranic legislation. While the Quran presents universal principles, the Prophet's Sunnah translates those principles into concrete actions, clarifies general rulings, and exemplifies divine ethics. Thus, Quran and Hadith exist not as two separate authorities but as an integrated legal system. Throughout Islamic legal history, scholars developed rigorous methods of authentication to assess hadith credibility, ensure reliability, and determine their legal status. This dual textual

authority shaped the methodology of legal derivation employed by classical and modern scholars alike.

With the changing times and the complexity of social life, scholars have developed methods of interpreting the texts of the Quran and Hadith, including the qathi and zhanni approaches (Zekkour & Imamuddin, 2024; Abbas, 2025; Nugroho et al., 2023). These developments emerged not in a vacuum but as a response to the evolving needs of Muslim societies that expanded geographically and culturally beyond the Arabian Peninsula. As new socio-political realities emerged such as administrative governance, economic transactions, and intercultural exchanges the need for methodological clarity in deriving legal rulings intensified. This approach plays a crucial role in understanding the extent to which a text can be used as an absolute legal basis or, conversely, remains open to interpretation through ijtihad (Albelahi et al., 2018; Ramadan, 2006). A qathi text is understood as one that is clear in both its source and meaning, leaving no room for differing interpretations (Mujib et al., 2020). This category reflects definitiveness that binds legal rulings without the possibility of contestation. In contrast, the zhanni text is not absolute in terms of both transmission and interpretation, thus allowing for variations in the interpretation and application of law (Jarrah et al., 2024). Zhanni texts are those that carry multiple semantic possibilities, may have singular transmission chains, or require interpretive reasoning to extract their legal implications.

This research aims to examine in depth how the concepts of qathi and zhanni are understood within the Islamic scholarly tradition, as well as their implications for establishing Islamic law, particularly in addressing contemporary issues. By understanding these two approaches, it is hoped that a wiser and more contextual understanding of Islamic teachings will emerge in addressing the dynamics of modern society. Such examination is not merely descriptive but analytical, revealing layers of epistemological differentiation that govern legal certainty and interpretive flexibility. Without mastering these foundational categories, one risks misjudging which rulings are immutable and which allow room for reinterpretation.

The distinction between qath'i and zhanni has long served as the compass through which Islamic law maintains balance between textual fidelity and contextual adaptability. Qath'i reflects the definitive dimension of scripture that stabilizes faith and ritual practice, while zhanni embodies interpretive openness that enables juristic engagement. These epistemic categories provide a structured space where continuity and renewal coexist allowing Islamic teachings to remain relevant across diverse eras.

Classical jurists meticulously articulated criteria for determining whether a text falls under qath'i or zhanni based on two fundamental aspects: *tsubut* (authenticity of origin) and *dalalah* (clarity of meaning). When a scriptural text reaches unquestionable authenticity, such as Quranic verses transmitted through *tawātur*, it is categorized as *qath'i al-tsubut*. Meanwhile, hadith transmitted through singular chains (*khabar al-wahid*) often fall under *zhanni al-tsubut* due to probabilistic transmission. The distinction becomes even more nuanced at the interpretive level. A text may be *qath'i al-tsubut* yet *zhanni al-dalalah* if its wording accommodates multiple interpretations. Conversely, a text with singular transmission may still carry *qath'i al-dalalah* if its meaning is unambiguous. Scholars therefore emphasize that evaluating scriptural certainty requires careful assessment of both authenticity and indication, not merely one dimension.

As Muslim societies progressed, scholars did not remain confined to literal textual reading. They developed complex interpretive tools analogy (*qiyās*), juristic preference (*istihsān*), public interest (*maslahah mursalah*), blocking harm (*sadd al-dharā'i*), and objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) to respond to evolving socio-legal realities. However, they used these tools only in the domain of zhanni, ensuring that human reasoning operates under revelation but does not override definitive texts. This reinforces why qath'i rulings remain constant such as prayer cycles, fasting obligations, or inheritance shares while legal rulings concerning trade, medical ethics, or governance develop over time.

Modern scholars increasingly revisit qath'i–zhanni classification to address contemporary issues including bioethics, artificial intelligence, global finance, and emerging social norms. Without this epistemological foundation, modern Islamic discourse would struggle to differentiate between immutable religious principles and issues subject to reinterpretation. Thus, this research holds significance in preserving methodological continuity while engaging contemporary needs..

METHODS

This study is a qualitative study using a library research approach, focusing on the analysis of classical and contemporary Islamic textual sources. This approach is used to explore the concepts of qathi and zhanni in understanding the texts of the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as their relevance to the determination of Islamic law and the practice of ijtihad. The primary data in this study consists of the Qur'an, Hadith, and the classical works of scholars of usul fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) such as Abdul Wahhab Khallaf, Al-Syatibi, Abu Zahrah, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from scientific journals, academic articles, and books discussing ijtihad methodology, textual and contextual approaches to interpretation, and modern Islamic legal theory. Data collection was carried out through documentation study, namely by examining and critically analyzing relevant texts. Meanwhile, data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method, namely describing the views of scholars on the concepts of qathi and zhanni, then analyzing them systematically to reach logical and argumentative conclusions. The goal of this method is to deeply understand how religious texts are categorized and interpreted, and how reason (ijtihad) is used in responding to the ever-evolving social context. With this method, it is hoped that this paper will contribute to a more dynamic and contextual understanding of Islam.

To increase methodological depth, the qualitative design employed in this study follows a multi-stage analytical process. First, data identification was conducted by collecting primary Islamic legal sources alongside scholarly interpretations that discuss textual certainty, scriptural epistemology, and the theoretical foundation of usul fiqh. This ensured that the materials used in the research are authentic, academically recognized, and relevant to the core conceptual inquiry. Second, data were subjected to coding and thematic categorization. Texts referring to qathi al-tsubut, zhanni al-tsubut, qathi al-dalalah, and zhanni al-dalalah were grouped and examined to determine how scholars classify Quranic and Hadith evidence based on certainty of origin and clarity of meaning. This step allowed the researcher to trace doctrinal patterns, identify conceptual similarities and differences among jurists, and map debates regarding scriptural certainty and interpretive flexibility.

Third, a critical comparative analysis was employed. Classical juristic writings were compared with contemporary academic works to identify continuity, divergence, and development of thought. This comparative dimension is essential because the discourse on qathi and zhanni is not static; the meaning and application of these concepts have evolved alongside historical realities. Through comparison, the research examines how earlier scholars approached legal certainty and how modern scholars reinterpret the categories within current socio-legal contexts. The comparative aspect strengthens the analytic rigor, ensuring that findings are not descriptive but evaluative and reflective of scholarly progression.

Fourth, interpretive reading (tafsīr maudhū'ī) was utilized for Quranic and Hadith textual samples associated with certainty and probability. Each text was interpreted in relation to its linguistic structure, semantic indication, legal implication, and juristic commentary. Attention was given to classical tafsir, hadith commentaries, and usul fiqh treatises to understand how legal authority is derived and justified. This interpretive strategy retains fidelity to the nature of Islamic scholarship while enabling contextual understanding of normative texts within contemporary frameworks.

In addition, the research process also adopted hermeneutic examination to situate texts within their socio-historical context. Understanding when and why a verse or hadith was revealed

assists in recognizing the difference between universal rulings grounded in qathi certainty and rulings that are relational to social circumstances thus categorized as zhanni and open to ijtihad. This hermeneutic perspective ensures that interpretation is not detached from the lived realities of revelation, and that legal reasoning reflects both textual evidence and contextual wisdom.

Throughout each stage of analysis, reliability and validity were maintained through triangulation of sources. Multiple scholarly perspectives were compared to avoid partial interpretation and to ensure balanced representation. The study did not rely solely on one school of thought; instead, it engaged multiple jurisprudential frameworks including Sunni legal schools, modern reformist discourse, and contemporary academic research. Analytical notes were documented systematically to trace how conclusions were drawn, strengthening transparency and reproducibility in qualitative research.

Furthermore, the descriptive-analytical approach used in this study emphasizes not only textual description but also critical argumentation. Descriptive explanation provides foundational understanding of qathi and zhanni definitions, whereas analytical interpretation examines the implications of these classifications for legal authority and the role of ijtihad. Through this method, the research does not merely summarize scholarly views but interrogates them, evaluating how certainty and probability shape Islamic law in theory and application.

By integrating documentation study, thematic coding, comparative analysis, interpretive reading, and hermeneutic contextualization, the methodology supports deep and holistic exploration of qathi and zhanni. This multi-layered design aligns with the study's objective to present a rigorous scholarly understanding that preserves classical legal epistemology while engaging the needs of contemporary discourse. The method ultimately enables the research to articulate how legal certainty and interpretive flexibility coexist, how scholars determine which texts are final and which allow reinterpretation, and how this classification sustains the dynamism of Islamic jurisprudence in different historical periods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scholars' Views on the Concepts of Qath'i and Zhanni

The concepts of qath'i and zhanni are important foundations in the science of ushul fiqh and have significantly influenced the istinbat method of Islamic law (Mappasessu & Akmal, 2025; Janah & Hasan, 2025). Scholars differ in their views on this matter, which can generally be classified into two groups: classical scholars (classical ushuliyyūn) and contemporary thinkers. These two concepts are used to understand the status and strength of a legal text (nash) in terms of both tsubut (authenticity of the source) and dalalah (indication of meaning) (Bahril et al., 2024; Arifin et al., 2023).

Qath'i and Zhanni in the Aspect of al-Tsubūt (Certainty of the Authenticity of the Source)

According to Safi Hasan Abu Talib, qath'i al-tsubūt is a text that has come down to us with certainty, without doubt, because it was narrated by mutawatir (authenticity). In this case, the entire contents of the Qur'an are considered qath'i al-tsubūt because its transmission is mutawatir and has been agreed upon by the people (ijma'). Meanwhile, zhanni al-tsubūt are texts narrated in ahad, such as the majority of hadith, especially famous and ahad hadith, which do not reach the level of mutawatir. Mutawatir hadith are classified as qath'i al-wurūd because the large number of narrators at each level of the sanad makes it impossible for lies to occur (Wahid et al., 2025; Muhyidin & Nashihin. 2025). Conversely, ahad hadith are included in zhanni al-wurūd because the historical aspect of their narration does not reach the level of certainty (Supardin, 2020).

Qath'i and Zhanni in the Aspect of al-Dalālah (Certainty of Meaning)

In terms of dalālah, a text is called qath'i al-dalālah if the pronunciation has a single, definite meaning and does not open up space for alternative interpretations. For example, verses about inheritance, the number of prayer cycles, or hudud limits. Abu Zahrah explained that qath'i

al-dalālah is a very clear translation of the text and does not require further interpretation. On the other hand, zhanni al-dalālah appears when a lafaz has more than one possible meaning, such as the lafaz 'amm (general), musytarak (multi-meaning), and muthlaq (without limitations), thus opening up space for takwil. This difference is very influential in ijtihad. Nash's qath'i al-dalālah does not open up space for ijtihad, while text's zhanni al-dalālah actually becomes the main area for ijtihad activities. Therefore, the majority of ulama's ijtihad is focused on the zhanni texts, both in terms of tsubut and dalalah (Wahid & Musyahid, 2024).

Polarization of Discourse on Understanding Islamic Teachings

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Muslims faced challenges in understanding religious teachings, particularly in integrating sacred texts with evolving social realities. Two main approaches emerged in response to this dynamic: (1) Textual (literal) approach: emphasizes adherence to the text as it is, without giving much space to the social context; (2) Contextual (liberal) approach: places greater emphasis on the goals and spirit of Islamic law (maqasid sharia), as well as responding to developments in modern society. Figures such as Umar ibn Khattab have historically demonstrated a contextual tendency by prioritizing social reality over textual formalities. The debate between the ta'abbudi and ta'aqquli approaches has become central to discussions about the permissibility of developing Islamic law (Wahidi et al., 2021).

Interrelationship of Text and Context in the Interpretation of Sharia Texts

In contemporary studies, the relationship between sharia texts and social context has become a is crucial. Thinkers such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd have stated that the Quranic texts are responses to social realities and humanitarian problems at the time of their revelation (Hakim, 2016). Therefore, understanding the texts must always take into account the socio-historical context. Al-Qaradawi stated that only about 10% of religious texts are qath'i, while the other 90% are zhanni and can be interpreted according to the times (Hakim, 2016). This approach opens up significant room for contextual ijtihad, especially in matters of muamalah (transactions). The logic of Islamic law is based not only on the strength of the text but also on the philosophical and ethical foundations shaped by social reality. In other words, limitations (impairments) in the law are not weaknesses, but rather encourage the birth of moral and contextual ijtihad. This aligns with the concept of zhanni, which is open and dynamic in legal determination. Therefore, a contextual approach to zhanni texts is not only methodologically justified, but also ethically and philosophically justified in legal education. Islam (Wahid & Musyahid, 2024). According to al-Qarafi, fatwas must reflect the realities of society and not be based solely on texts detached from their context. Failure to consider context can lead to errors in interpreting sharia (Hakim, 2016).

Qath'i and Zhanni in Al-Shatibi's Thought Framework

Al-Shatibi emphasized that it is not easy to find texts that independently possess a qath'i meaning. According to him, almost all texts, when standing alone, are zhanni. Certainty (qath'i) only arises when a number of zhanni arguments support the same meaning, which then results in qath'i in mutawatir ma'nawi (consistent meaning). Al-Shatibi also detailed ten factors that determine the certainty of meaning, most of which are zhanni and can only be obtained through imperfect inductive methods. This demonstrates that the epistemology of Islamic law is highly complex and cannot be simplified with absolute claims.

Implications of the Concepts of Qath'i and Zhanni in the Development of Islamic Jurisprudence

From the entire discussion, it can be concluded that: (1) Mahdhah worship (such as prayer, fasting, zakat) is based on a qath'i text and cannot be changed; (2) Mu'amalah and 'adah (social affairs and human interactions) are subjective and can evolve according to context, through ijtihad. This view offers a compromise between maintaining the purity of Islamic teachings and the social relevance of Islamic law in every era. According to M. Quraish Shihab,

understanding the Quran cannot be separated from the context of life, because revelation itself aims to guide humans in living real life.

CONCLUSION

The concepts of qath'i and zhanni in understanding the texts of the Qur'an and Hadith indicate a fundamental difference in terms of the certainty of source and meaning, which directly impacts the scope of ijtihad in Islamic law. Qath'i is definite and does not open to interpretation, while zhanni is uncertain and requires reasoning to understand it. In this context, reason plays a strategic role as a bridge between the static text of revelation and dynamic social reality. Therefore, a contextual approach through ijtihad is crucial, not only to maintain the relevance of Islamic teachings in modern society, but also to ensure that sharia is always able to respond to the challenges of the times while adhering to the maqasid al-shari'ah.

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